

## Lovely As You Are

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# Lovely As You Are

by [SadLesbianPrincess](#)

## Summary

Alfred 'The Hero' Jones is a young American MMA fighter who has his sights set on the UFC championship. But when he challenges the current champion, Ivan Braginsky, a Russian fighter who goes by the title Ivan the Terrible, things don't go quite as planned, and he finds himself in the hospital. After a few weeks alone in his hospital room, another patient is brought in to Alfred's room: a British model named Arthur Kirkland, whose bad habits have caught up with him. In that room, broken together, they learn their little secrets, see their little beauties, and put each other back together again. Running from the past as it tries to catch up with them.

“You’re like a painting,” Alfred whispered against his lips. “You move like watercolor. You breathe out colors of the sunset, you blink in shades of grass and emerald green. You touch me the way an artist touches brush to canvas, you mark my skin and bleed your paint onto me. Sometimes you’re saturated and bright, sometimes you speak in gray and black hues. Everything about you is beautiful.”

## Notes

hi loves! welcome to my usuk story, Lovely As You Are.

s/o to Ben Howard for the title idea. Thanks Ben.

usuk holds a very special place in my heart. this may sound dramatic, but Alfred helped me be more patriotic and love my country despite its flaws. His relationship with Arthur seems to me complex, full of problems and also full of beauty. Their emotional connection to each other is deep and passionate and I have a lot of feels about it.

trigger warning: discussions about eating disorders. take care of yourself, love.

also, one last important thing: I'd like to dedicate this story to Muhammad Ali, who was such an inspiration to me and I'm sure to little Alfred Jones. He paved the road for people like me to feel

proud of their heritage and throw the punches we love to throw.

enjoy the story, fight on, I love you (:

The last time Ivan the Terrible had been challenged, a few months ago, he had knocked his opponent unconscious in less than thirty seconds and with a single punch.

“You need more accuracy. I want every single punch to be absolutely perfect, you hear?”

It was a wonder he had even been challenged at all in the past year. His journey to the top had left his hands covered in blood.

“Don’t sacrifice power for speed. Concentrate, Al. I want power, speed, *and* accuracy.”

He’d earned his title because five years ago, before he’d been able to call himself the champion, he had beaten a fighter so hard that he’d left him in a coma. From which he had never woken up.

“There you go, on your toes. Your shoulders should be killing you.”

And in a few weeks, Alfred ‘The Hero’ Jones, the young American fighter who had been making his name in the world of MMA more quickly than anyone could have imagined, would challenge him. The world featherweight champion. Ivan Braginsky—Ivan the Terrible.

“Range, Al! Range! You can punch further than that.”

And Alfred, for the first time in his life, was terrified.

Those were the thoughts rushing through Alfred’s head, making it spin, as he punched at the bag swinging before him. He felt the pressure of the bag against his wrapped knuckles and his bare shins, watched it swing away from him only to throw another punch as soon as it circled back around. He could see the puddle of sweat gathering at his toes. But he kept moving, spurred by the bellows of his coach standing beside him. He tried to imagine Ivan Braginsky instead of the punching bag. It seemed to be making his punches weaker. He didn’t notice.

One of Alfred's unsung talents was that of convincing himself that he wasn't afraid. He wasn't sure when it had happened but at some point in the course of his life, he had managed to say "I don't know what fear means" enough times that he actually believed it.

"Stop, stop, this isn't working."

He had trouble catching his breath, trouble keeping his balance with his shaky limbs, when Coach stepped between him and the punching bag. Alfred felt that his heart was skipping beats, that his knees were about to buckle and send him crashing to the floor, that his body was starting to abandon him. Coach's deep red eyes stared into his, and then scoured his entire body. Eyebrows raised, lips pursed, sigh heavy, Coach put his hands on his hips.

"I've never seen you train like this," he said. "You couldn't knock out my grandmother with those punches."

"C'mon, that's a bit harsh, don't you think, boss?" Alfred's voice was hoarse. It startled even him. He was so accustomed to seeing Coach's broad smile, hearing Coach's loud, snarky laugh, that his expression of absolute seriousness was jarring.

"We're taking a break. Get a drink of water, champ."

Alfred's hand was trembling when he brought his water bottle to his lips. He only noticed when he felt the water dripping down his chin. His entire body was off-balance, his mind jumbled. He grabbed a towel and buried his face in it and tried to breathe. In the darkness he saw Ivan Braginsky's face.

"Sit down, Al."

He sat down beside Coach, on the edge of a practice ring. They were the last ones left in the gym—it was at least ten-thirty, and Coach had tried insisting that Alfred go home and rest. But Alfred had refused. He wanted to get in as much training as possible in the next few weeks. He wanted to feel that he was as strong as he could be, and that he hadn't wasted a single minute, a single second, a single breath, on anything else. As he sat next to him, Coach draped his arm around Alfred's sweaty shoulders.

Coach Gilbert was a middle-aged man with the vigor of an eighteen year-old college student and the alcohol tolerance of an eighty year-old war veteran. He owned this New York City gym and had been Alfred's trainer for the past five years, ever since he'd

discovered him fighting off muggers in the alley near his house with the wild, inexperienced punches of a high schooler. He was pale and German and had white hair despite his forty-something age, and his punches could still make even Alfred dizzy. His demanding presence and explosive confidence, along with his respected name in the world of MMA, gave him the best chances of keeping Alfred in line—though Alfred’s arrogance would never allow him to yield completely. At the very least, Gilbert Beilschmidt was the only person who was fit to train a fighter like Alfred.

“Listen to me, Al,” he said. Alfred wasn’t sure why he was talking so quietly. They were the only ones in the gym, after all. “If you’re going to half-ass this shit, then you might as well go home and rest.”

“I’m not half-assing it,” Alfred protested. “I thought I was doing fine.”

“Then you’re either delusional, or too tired for this anyway.” He looked into Alfred’s eyes again, as if he were searching for something there. Alfred blinked, tried to offer what he could of his soul, until Coach tore his gaze away.

“Coach, the fight is in a few weeks. If there’s something I need to work on, then I need to work on it *now*.”

“Your techniques are fine. Stamina could use work.”

“Then let’s do stamina.”

“But I think your mental state is what needs the most work at this point.”

“What? Are you kidding?” Alfred let out a burst of laughter and hopped to his feet. He flashed his toothy smile, the same that was famous for wooing fans all over the world. “My mental state is the strongest thing about me! I’m ready to take on anyone. Even Ivan Braginsky.”

“I know. That’s the problem.”

“You say it all the time. If you don’t believe that you’re awesome, then you will never be awesome.”

Alfred was waiting for Coach’s joyful, rich laugh to fill the gym as it always did. But the seriousness on his face remained, and it had been so prolonged by this point that Alfred felt uneasy. He shifted his

weight and fidgeted with his towel and couldn't look at Coach's face for more than a few moments before feeling uncomfortable.

"How about this. Go take a shower. You're spending the night at my house tonight—I don't want you walking back to your apartment this late. And we're gonna have ourselves a little chat."

"Aw, come on, boss, I'm not a little kid."

"Would you just do what I say, punk?" Coach sighed. But, finally, he was smiling. He stood up and ruffled Alfred's hair. "I'm the coach and you're the coachee. So you do what I say."

"I don't think coachee is a word. At least, not in English."

"Shut up, you smell like the inside of a sock."

Forty-five minutes later, Alfred was sitting on Coach's couch with a protein shake and a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He'd asked for hot cocoa, but Coach had refused, claiming stubbornly that protein shakes were the best way to stay sharp and motivated. Coach sat down with his own cup of hot cocoa—to spite Alfred, of course—and put his feet up on the table. His small, yellow bird was chirping in its cage.

"Lemme ask you something, Al. Do you honestly feel ready to fight Ivan the Terrible?"

"What kind of question is that? I wouldn't be challenging him if I didn't."

"Fair enough. You think your style of fighting can win?"

"Sure I do. I move better than he does. I'm faster than he is. I can throw kicks, and I've never seen him once lift his leg off the ground."

"Your styles are practically polar opposites," Coach scoffed, "except for the fact that you can both knock someone out with one punch."

"Exactly. I can totally take him. Pull a Rocky IV on his Russian ass."

Coach sat up straighter and his seriousness returned and Alfred hated that. He sipped his protein shake anxiously.

"I want you to be serious. Listen, really listen when I tell you

this.”

Alfred heard his own voice grow quieter.

“All right, all right. I’m listening.”

“You haven’t lost a fight at all in the past two years, and you haven’t won a fight by anything other than a knockout. You’re on a roll.” He paused. “But I don’t want you to get cocky. I don’t want you to go into this fight thinking that you have it in the bag. You’ve seen Braginsky fight. You know what he’s capable of.”

Alfred didn’t say anything. For once, he couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I hate to tell you, champ, but you can’t knock him out. You can’t knock him out and he’ll definitely outlast you. Don’t get me wrong. Your left hook is fucking terrifying. But someone like Braginsky won’t go down like most people. His...well, his *everything* is terrifying. You can’t use the same strategy with him that you use with everyone else. Getting in a few good punches isn’t going to do it.”

When Alfred looked away, down at the ground, Coach put his cup of cocoa on the table. Then he reached up and put his hands on Alfred’s cheeks and jerked his head up, forced him to look into his eyes.

“I think you can win it, Al. I really do. But you need to be careful.”

Coach’s words were starting to bring Alfred’s subconscious, hidden fears to the forefront of his mind. He was starting to tremble again, if so slightly that even he couldn’t notice.

“You need to be really, really careful. Braginsky is just as terrible as they say. He’ll chew you up and spit you out and leave you there until you bleed out. I know you like your showy moves and your stupid little jumps, but I want to nip that in the bud right now. I want *none* of that, you hear?”

“I hear.”

“You know what happened five years ago, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know.”



“He didn’t just take away someone’s career, Al. He took away someone’s life. Get your recklessness in check.” He lightly slapped Alfred’s cheeks and ruffled his hair again. “And that means no more training sessions at ten-thirty. You’re psyching yourself out. Train the way you always do and you’ll be fine.”

Alfred leaned back against the couch, sipped his protein shake, stared at the blank screen of the television.

“I hate it when you’re this serious, boss,” he finally said.

“Oh, stop it with the pouts. You know it’s just because I care.”

“I hate it when you’re this mushy, too.”

“Fuck off, will ya, punk?”

Alfred smiled, and Coach smiled back. But then the smile disappeared and he said, “You know, Alfred. It’s okay to be scared.”

*Scared? Me?*

*Please.*

*Heroes don’t get scared.*

As Alfred slept, he dreamed of his previous fights. He felt the rush of the adrenaline as if he really were fighting, moving around the ring with his haughty smile and clenched fists. He relived the moments of ducking under reckless punches and shoving his fist up against his opponent’s liver—of slipping past a punch, or catching a kick, and returning the favor with a clean hook to the jaw. He relived what it had been like to stand over a fallen opponent over and over again and hear the referee call out his name as champion and hear the stadium erupt with chants of “Hero, Hero, Hero!” In his dreams, he saw Ivan Braginsky, vacant face bloodied and eerie smile wiped clean, at his feet. He wanted to be the champion. Until his name was in lights and people in every corner of the world knew his face, Alfred Jones wouldn’t be satisfied. Not at all.

Alfred Jones was known for his well-roundedness in the ring. The combination of his fluidity, accuracy, and power was terrifying to most opponents, who couldn’t really handle one thing as well as the other. Nobody could switch stances at will the way Alfred did, and nobody could throw a moving punch as strong as Alfred did. His talents lay in both messing with the minds of his opponents with his

seemingly random, haphazard movements, and also overwhelming them with the unbelievable and unfair power in his fists. A clean, strong hook—from either his left or his right—almost always meant a knockout. Early in his career, people had enjoyed speculating that he was on steroids, or other drugs, or perhaps a mutant. Such was the immensity of his talent in the ring. And worse than all of that was the fact that he looked beautiful, looked quick, looked natural, when he was in the ring. Nobody had seen him lose.

Ivan the Terrible was a fighter of a different breed, though some might argue that the two were actually frighteningly similar in power and intensity.

Braginsky was a bit bigger than Alfred. His height was 5'11, an inch taller, and his muscles were bulkier and more evident than Alfred's leaner, sculpted ones. His body type overall was larger. More intimidating somehow.

But his body wasn't the most intimidating part about him.

His fighting style was more power-based. Which was not to say that Alfred was not powerful. He was stronger than most of the guys in the game. But when he fought, he tended to delegate his strengths to different areas, and he was able to remain nimble, agile, and strategic. He moved a lot during fights. Switched stances. Moved his hands and stayed on his toes as a means of defense and intimidation. He used his power when he needed it.

The way Braginsky used his power was completely different. He didn't move as much. His methods were more flat-footed, as if he were stomping on the earth beneath him when he stepped. And when he threw his punches, it was as if every ounce of strength in his body flooded into that tight, veined fist. His power was more raw, more uncontrolled, than Alfred's. He punched as if he didn't care what happened to him. And he almost never used his legs. His fighting style was more akin to boxing, whereas Alfred's was closer to kickboxing.

But his fighting style wasn't the most intimidating thing about him, either.

Whenever Alfred (or anyone else, for that matter) watched Braginsky fight, he felt awful uneasiness. With each fight, each interview, each article that he read about the swift rise of Russian MMA fighter Ivan Braginsky, the uneasiness grew. Not because of his mountainous body, not because of his wild and fearless fighting style,

but because of his face.

There was always a slight, eerie smile on his lips. It was a smile that seemed disconnected from the other features of his face. But even as he smiled, his eyes were empty. Completely hollow. When he stared straight at the camera, or looked down upon his fallen opponent, the vacant look in his merciless violet eyes sent chills down Alfred's spine.

Ivan the Terrible was terrible not only because he left opponents bedridden and scarred and traumatized.

Ivan the Terrible was terrible because he did it deliberately, and he did it without remorse.

Ivan the Terrible was terrible because he delighted in it.

The camera was right in front of him and it was flashing with each photo it snapped and Arthur felt that he should have been enjoying it, eating it up. But he felt nothing, not a single ounce of emotion, as he changed his pose. Narrowed his eyes at the camera. Tuned out the praise and commands (useless, always) of the photoshoot's director. He wanted to be done with this, wanted to be finished so he could have a cigarette and tell everyone to fuck off. He wasn't in the mood for a shoot today. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in the mood.

*Why am I doing this again?*

When the last photo had been snapped, Arthur moved straight to the chair that had been set up for him. He completely ignored the director and photographer, both of whom were speaking to him. Expressing how much of a privilege it was to work with him.

*Of course it's a privilege to work with me.*

He sat down and he lit his cigarette and he thought about how fucking hungry he was.

"Do I have anything else to do today?" he asked his manager, Kiku. Kiku was a short, soft-spoken Japanese man who had, for one reason or another, found himself in the entertainment labyrinths of the United Kingdom. He was an unbelievably competent manager. He scrolled through his iPad, the means by which he controlled Arthur's

life, and shook his head.

“No, nothing. But you have an early shoot tomorrow.”

“Marvelous, just what I need.”

“Don’t forget your trip to New York City next weekend.”

“Oh, fucking hell, I almost forgot.”

Arthur let the cigarette dangle from his lips and massaged his aching temples. He felt his entire head about to explode. How long had it been, he wondered, since he’d actually enjoyed this? How long ago had he been just starting out, green and earnest and fanciful in his supermodel dreams? How long ago since he’d become this emotionless about it all? And still, even telling himself that he was emotionless was a farce. Of course this was his life, of course he still cared, of course every detail mattered and every word he heard from the directors and the photographers danced around in his skull for days and days.

“Move your arm over there, so that it doesn’t look bigger than it needs to.”

“Tilt your chin up, love, it’s much more charming and makes you look taller.”

“Well, Mr. Kirkland, looks like you’ve been eating plenty!”

“You really should smoke less.”

“The camera loves you. Try to love it back.”

“Trim your eyebrows, they’re a bit bushy, don’t you think?”

“Why must you always look so irritable?”

“A salad? That’s it? Are you sure? You know you can’t be *too* skinny.”

He tilted his head back and watched the smoke leave his puckered lips and reach up for the gray, clouded sky. He watched it float for an eternity before Kiku’s voice brought him back to earth.

“Arthur. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes. Fancy some dinner?”

“Sure.”

He slept like a log the night before his fight with Braginsky. Took a long shower. Ate well. He did a session of hot yoga to loosen his muscles and relax himself and relax the racings of his mind. He didn't train much on the morning of the fight. He just went for a run, begging Coach to join him in Central Park. They ran through the gardens and the fountains, and went to the center of the Mall and sat on the edge of the fountain. It motivated Alfred. He had always known that he wanted to win at everything, but he needed a reminder every now and then. Seeing all the people, and imagining them crying his name as he held his fists up in triumph, was perfect. Even as he pushed away the tiny voices in his head telling him to be scared, and warning him. Don't fight him, they were saying. Don't fight Ivan the Terrible.

He spent the hours before the fight in Coach's room, cross-legged on the bed with Lizzie and Coach, talking strategy.

Elizabeta was Coach Gil's best childhood friend and co-owner of the gym, but she insisted that everyone call her Lizzie. Said it made her feel younger than she actually was as she approached her inevitable mid-life crisis. She was kind and ambitious and her boldness rivaled even Coach's, and it made sense that they had been friends for decades. And despite her long hair and undeniable femininity, her name still echoed in the rings of female competition. And she doted on Alfred shamelessly.

He was staring at the bed sheets while they talked. Defenses up, always cover your face, you know the drill. Stay on your toes, circle the ring, dominate it, let him know that it's *your* ring. Go in every opening you see, jump in and jump out, don't give him any chances. Tire him out, try not to get tired out. If you feel yourself getting exhausted, loosen up and throw him bait. Get out of range. Let him come to you. Don't get backed up against the fence, because he will take advantage.

Remember to love yourself, love your body, protect it. It's the only one you've got, Al, it's the only one you've got.

The stadium was large. The fight had a bigger audience than he was expecting, and it made him excited. He could already hear the

screams. Lizzie and Coach left him to his pre-fight rituals. He put on his headphones and blasted the music—Survivor—as loudly as it would go. He wanted to hear the guitar, feel the drums, in his soul. He punched a bag to the beat. The final song to come on was “Eye of the Tiger.” He knew it was cliché, but he didn’t care. He believed that the moments leading up to the fight were almost as important, if not more important, than the fight itself. It was about getting into his zone, reminding himself what he was here for, how hard he’d worked. He was singing to himself when Coach came to retrieve him.

“You’re up, champ,” Coach said to him, giving him his jacket. It was his Captain America jacket. He wore it for good luck before every fight. “Don’t let ‘em down.”

“Fuck no.”

“You know what to do.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“What was that?”

“Fuck yeah!”

Coach slapped his back and they walked out to the ring. Before he entered the ring, hopping up and down, rolling his neck, fixing his mouth-guard and his gloves, Coach looked into his eyes and slammed his hands down on his shoulders.

“What’re you gonna do out there, champ?”

“Give ‘em hell,” Alfred hissed.

*“What’re you gonna do out there?”*

*“Give ‘em hell!”*

“Atta boy,” Coach said. He put out his fists and grinned his snarky, crooked grin. Alfred pounded his fists against Coach’s and let him ruffle his hair. The way he always did. “Don’t forget what we talked about, Al.”

“Right.”

Alfred looked across the ring and saw Ivan Braginsky. Speaking with his coach. A blonde, stone-faced woman who was feet shorter than Ivan and whose glare looked as if it could cut through steel. And

there was Ivan. Tall and burly and with an aura about him, an aura that Alfred could see even from this far. He wondered if he had an aura like that, one that made his opponents fear him the way that he was fearing Ivan at the moment, more than he'd ever feared anything. Alfred was brave—at least, he liked to believe he was brave, and he was good at convincing himself that he was brave. But when Ivan unexpectedly looked over at him, that eerie smile on his lips and the vacant glaze over his eyes, he felt terror.

“What’re you thinking?” Coach asked him. Alfred must’ve looked afraid, too. But he didn’t want to tell Coach that.

“Remember what Muhammad Ali said?”

“Remind me.”

“If you even dream of beating me, you’d better wake up and apologize.”

“Go in there and make him apologize to you, Alfred.”

“You got it, boss.”

Alfred took off his jacket and walked into the ring, where the referee was waiting. As his bare feet touched the mat, and across the ring Ivan did the same, the stadium erupted. Chants of “Hero! Hero! Hero!” combined with “Ivan! Ivan! Ivan!” deafened him. He couldn’t hear the pounding of his heart.

They stood in the ring across from each other. Staring at each other. A pair of blue eyes, blue like the sky, and a pair of violet eyes, though they looked more like blood. Both of their bodies etched with scars and stray tattoos. Alfred cracked his knuckles and hummed “Eye of the Tiger” to himself. He couldn’t let those eyes get to him. Couldn’t let that smile worm its way beneath his skin.

The announcer said their names in his bellowing voice.

“Alfred ‘The Hero’ Jooooooooooooones!”

Applause. Cheers.

“Ivan Bragiiiiinsky the Terrible!”

Applause. Cheers.

“Let’s have a good fight,” the ref said as they met in the center.



Alfred and Ivan looked into each other's eyes again—Alfred had never felt such animosity directed toward him in his life. They touched gloves. As they did, Braginsky leaned forward. He dropped his voice to whisper the words that slipped through that seamless smile.

“Nice to meet you, Alfred Foster Jones. The Hero,” he said. The first person to use his full name since Alfred could remember. His mother used to use it when she was angry with him. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this encounter. I look forward to it.”

His accent was rough and heavy, but his English pristine.

“To crushing you.”

Alfred couldn't find words in his arsenal to respond. So he pulled out his strongest weapon: his smile. He bared his pearls and gave Ivan the Terrible a wink.

“Same here. Ivan the Terrible.”

There was nothing but cruelty in their eyes. Nothing but the desire for victory.

*Nothing else exists.*

The bell went off. The first round began.

The first round wasn't as eventful as he'd wished or expected. They were simply getting a feel for each other. Alfred did what he knew how to do. He stayed on his toes, he jumped in and threw a few punches and jumped out. He could tell that Braginsky was watching his footwork. So he made sure to switch stances, just to throw him off, every few moments. He took a few punches to the jaw, but nothing serious. Nothing he wasn't ready for. But the crazy wild punches, the stomping, the tricks that Braginsky usually pulled out of his sleeve within the first few seconds of a match, weren't coming. It was as if Braginsky had forgotten the meaning of offense, and was made purely of defense and strategy. His eyes followed Alfred's every move.

But Alfred knew that he hadn't forgotten. He knew that Braginsky was holding back on purpose, playing some kind of game. His smile widened a little each time Alfred switched his stance, and his eyes glistened with each punch he took. None clean, on either end. As was his habit, Braginsky wasn't moving much. He stayed within a three-foot range of the center of the ring. Coach had told Alfred once, when he was getting too into a sparring match, to remember that it

wasn't always his job to attack. It was okay to wait for the opponent to come to you.

And that was most certainly the philosophy that Braginsky was fighting with. And Alfred knew it. But somehow, he couldn't stop it. He felt his legs begin to ache already, felt the sweat dripping down his bare torso. He told himself to slow down, told himself to take it easy, but his body wasn't responding to his mind. Every time he glanced up at Braginsky his smile was there, and it put an extra jolt into his steps. He felt that he was moving with perfect form, fluid techniques, but something was off balance. Everything was so strangely quiet.

Until the last ten seconds. Ivan the Terrible decided he wanted to leave a little message.

Alfred jumped into his range and to throw a few quick punches, try to land a clean one before the buzzer went off. He threw a jab—not clean. But Braginsky dropped his guard. Alfred went in for the clean cross, straight for Braginsky's open jaw.

But the hand that Braginsky had dropped came back up.

“ALFRED!”

Ivan the Terrible's hook landed. It shook Alfred to his very core. The pain exploded and his head was ringing so hard that he couldn't hear the buzzer. But somehow, by some miracle, he'd managed to stay on his feet.

*Thirty seconds until the next round...*

He was dizzy. Lightheaded. Nauseated. His jaw felt as if it had been smashed in with a hammer. He felt the metallic taste of blood on his tongue.

He managed to stumble back to where Coach was waiting, teeth bared and sweat pouring down his pale temple.

“Al, come here.”

“Coach...”

“Shh, shut up for a second. Close your eyes. Breathe. Open your mouth, I'm putting water in.”

Alfred closed his eyes, breathed, opened his mouth. He

swallowed the water. When he opened his eyes, the dizziness had subsided a little bit. Coach grabbed his cheeks and put his forehead against his and lowered his voice.

“You’re playing right into his hands. Your movements against anyone else would be fine, perfect, whatever, but not against this guy. You’re tiring yourself out, champ. Cool it. Stay on guard. If you let him land anymore hits like that, it’s dangerous.”

“I won’t.”

“Look at me, Al.”

Coach’s brow was furrowed and there was fire in his eyes.

“Be patient. Observe him. Be careful.” He squeezed, just tight enough. Alfred swallowed his pride and nodded. “Please be careful. I know that sounds like a load coming from me.”

The buzzer sounded.

“Go.”

He wiped the blood from his lip with the back of his hand and got back up. Hopped a little bit to get back into rhythm, narrowed his eyes at Ivan the Terrible. He was ready. That punch to his jaw was a wakeup call. He calmed down. Moved with the same fluidity, but more cautiously. Kept his defenses up. While Braginsky maintained his small circle of movement, taking a few steps but nothing more.

At least, that was what Alfred expected.

But Braginsky smiled and took another step forward.

And then another.

Alfred tried to back up at an angle, but Braginsky followed him. Suddenly Alfred was exactly where he didn’t want to be, where he needed not to be. Backed up against the ring. He knew Braginsky’s style well enough to know that he wouldn’t try to take him down, wouldn’t try to kick, wouldn’t try any knees. His fists were all he needed and all he used. So Alfred, now that he was against the wall, didn’t have much of a choice. He hunkered down and covered his face. He tried to follow Ivan’s fists with his elbows to avoid any major impact. As large and powerful as they were, his punches were deceptively quick. Alfred had never felt such intense pressure in his

life.

“I knew I was going to crush you, you know,” Ivan the Terrible whispered. “But that punch last round was supposed to knock you out.”

He managed to squeeze in a shovel up into Alfred’s side. His breath left him and his knees buckled from the aching pain.

“Now I want to crush you extra hard.”

Alfred lifted his eyes for a moment and wished that he hadn’t. Because there, that sneer was waiting. Just for him.

“After all...”

Alfred did the best he could to defend himself, but there was nothing left he could do. Those fists were breaking through his walls, making them crumble.

“I am Ivan the Terrible.”

When he threw the first hook, he didn’t aim for Alfred’s jaw like someone else might. He aimed for Alfred’s temple.

The entire stadium could hear the crack of his skull, at the very corner of his eye, where Ivan the Terrible’s knuckles collided. The pain was so sudden, so intense, so red, that he was blinded. He stumbled and closed the eye that had taken the impact. He was about to fall.

But Ivan the Terrible wouldn’t let it end there.

He threw his other fist against the same spot on the other side.

“Stop the fight!”

*Coach? Is that your voice?*

“Oi, I said stop the fucking fight!”

*No, Coach, don’t say that! I can keep fighting.*

Alfred couldn’t see anything. Everything was white. I can still fight, he told himself. I’m fine, he kept saying. I have to take out Ivan the Terrible. I have to be the world champion.

He slumped back against the ring's wall and crumpled. He could still feel himself in the shadow of Ivan the Terrible. He wanted to get out. He wanted to stand back up and fight again. But he couldn't move. He heard shouts, a whistle blowing.

He heard a voice say, "I told you I would crush you, Hero."

"Al. Hey, Al. Can you hear me? Hey."

*Coach, what are you doing in the ring? The round isn't over.*

He felt a pair of arms around his shoulders and reached up his hand, but he couldn't tell where it was. He tried to say something, and he felt his lips moving, but he wasn't sure what he was saying.

"How many fingers am I holding up, Al?"

*Fingers? What fingers? What are you talking about, Coach?*

"Someone call an ambulance!"

*An ambulance? What? Why? For who?*

The white was turning to black.

"Hey, Coach," he finally said, "did I win?"

Arthur could hear the sound of an ambulance from his New York City Four Seasons hotel room. He was sitting at the table, a tray from room service completely cleaned in front of him. Kiku had long since fallen asleep. He had such a strange way of sleeping, Arthur mused. Curled up like a little child, with only the very top of his black-haired head visible from the covers. The smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air. Arthur lit another one and smoked it to get the taste of his meal from his mouth. Then, feeling restless, he began to pace, hands in the pockets of his hotel bathrobe. The ambulance sirens grew louder, blared, and then grew quieter as they disappeared. Arthur was awfully tired.

The first photoshoot of his New York City trip had taken up his day. He was tired and fed-up and irritable and he absolutely hated the photographer. But it was an important shoot, an important campaign, one that Kiku had bent over backwards to get. Arthur almost felt guilty for not being as grateful as he should've been.

*But I can't very well help that, can I?*

As he paced, he passed by the full body mirror by the bathroom. He paused and looked himself over, perhaps driven by his inherent model's vanity. He pushed the bathrobe over his shoulders and let it fall to the ground. He let his bare body be revealed. He looked at his pale skin, marred by the black tattoos along his collarbone and arms. It was smooth and fair and he hated to look at it because he felt that it should've been smoother and fairer. He ran his fingers through his blonde hair—should it be more blonde? less blonde?—and wished that it were softer. He leaned forward and looked at his lips, too pouty. His eyes, too far apart. His eyebrows, too bushy. His teeth, too crooked, and with that gap in the front. He turned and looked at himself from the sides, from the front, as well as he could from the back.

*Too much, huh?*

Another pair of sirens sounded as Arthur crushed his cigarette and went into the bathroom. He closed the door and locked it and hoped that Kiku wouldn't wake up. He turned on the sink as high as it would go.

*I need to be ready for the second day of shooting tomorrow.*

*I'm not really ready right now.*

He got onto his knees in front of the toilet and leaned forward. He thought about how delicious the room service had been.

He stuck his fingers into his mouth and he puked it all up.

Then he went back out and lit another cigarette, listening to the ambulance sirens fade away.

When Alfred opened his eyes, everything was black, and he was confused. As disoriented as he was, as scared and sore and aching, he was positive that his eyes were open. But everything was just as black as it had been during his unconsciousness.

He jolted in his blind terror and tried to sit up, but he felt hands pushing him back down. He tried to open his mouth and say something, cry out, but he felt something blocking his lips—suddenly became aware of a tube that ran from his mouth down his throat. He couldn't see anything, he couldn't speak, he had no idea where he was or why this was happening or who was pushing him down onto this bed.

Alfred had never felt so frightened in his life.

A few moments later he felt drowsiness overcoming him. He fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

He wasn't sure how much time passed between the fight and the first time he truly regained his consciousness. The second time he woke up, still surrounded in complete darkness, he was able to come to the conclusion that he must have been in a hospital bed, with a tube to help him breathe. Why he couldn't see, why the tube was necessary, and why his body ached so much, were still complete mysteries. But his hearing was just perfect. He heard a familiar voice nearby. It was loud, demanding, excited, explosive. Hearing it calmed his racing heart, if only a little bit. Alfred lifted his hand and reached out in the direction of the voice. He found himself relieved that he could so easily move his arm. He'd been worried for a moment that that ability, too, had been robbed of him.

"Hey, hey, he's awake!"

Within moments, he felt two hands grasping his outstretched fingers. They squeezed his hand so tightly that it hurt. But Alfred didn't mind. That pain was nothing.

“Hey, champ. Doin’ all right?” Coach asked. Alfred did his best to nod his head. But the more time passed in this pitch darkness, the more frightened he was becoming. It was a bit of a lie to answer Coach’s question with a nod. “Doc! Get over here.”

*My eyes are killing me, Coach.*

*It’s kinda hard to breathe, Coach.*

“Ah, Alfred. You’re awake.”

This voice was unfamiliar. As it spoke, Alfred felt Coach bring his hand to his lips. He kissed his hand gently. Alfred felt tears on Coach’s cheeks. At least, he thought they were tears. He wished he could tell him not to cry.

“My name is Toris Laurinaitis. I’m your doctor, for the time being.”

The voice was smooth and kind. Even in its unfamiliarity, it comforted Alfred to know that there was a doctor with such a nice voice looking after him.

“You’re probably exhausted. I’ll explain to you what happened and how we’ve been treating you. When you came in three days ago, you had blowout fractures in both eyes—meaning that several of the bones surrounding your eyes buckled down and broke from blunt trauma. The result of two punches, according to Mr. Beilschmidt. We performed surgery in both eyes. It’ll take a bit of time for your eyes to heal, but we’re confident that in a few days some of your vision should be returning. But I’m going to be straight with you. There is a slight chance that your loss of vision will be permanent.”

Dr. Laurinaitis paused. Alfred could feel Coach shaking.

“You also came in with a fractured jaw. We had to perform surgery on that, as well, which is why we’ve had to insert an endotracheal tube for ventilation purposes. Don’t worry; the tube will only be in until tomorrow. It’s just that with the swelling of your jaw, it was difficult for you to breathe on your own.”

He heard Coach snifle.

“Finally, you have a single broken rib. It’s not serious, and it’ll heal on its own in a few weeks.”



He felt a cold, clammy hand reach up and brush the hair back from his face. It startled him at first, but as it continued to stroke his hair, he fell deeper against his pillow.

“All in all, I have to say that you’re relatively lucky. If you’d come in any later, the damage to your eyes might have been irreparable. It’s very lucky that you had Mr. Beilschmidt there.”

“Thanks, Doc. You’ve been a great help,” Coach said.

“My pleasure. I’ll leave you to get some rest. I promise that in a few days, your condition will be much better. We’ll take out the tube tomorrow.”

He heard the footsteps of the doctor walking away. Once they had completely faded, Coach sniffled again and let out a quiet, almost inaudible sob. Alfred felt that his hearing had suddenly gotten much better.

“Jeez, Al, don’t scare me like that,” he murmured. “You know you really had me going? When I saw that bastard land that punch, I...and when you fell over...I thought the worst, you know?”

He kissed Alfred’s hand again. His voice was muffled and hoarse and even though he couldn’t see it, Alfred was positive that Coach was trying very hard to smile.

“The worst part is that the fucking asshole was going to keep going. I saw him. I saw it, he was going to keep fucking going. If I hadn’t stepped in, who knows what could’ve happened to you, Al?”

Even if Alfred could’ve said anything, he wouldn’t have known what to say.

“I’m so relieved. You stupid little punk, I’m so happy you’re okay.”

*How did this happen, Coach?*

*Would ya stop crying already, Coach?*

Alfred closed his eyes because keeping them open was too much effort and didn’t make a difference and there was gauze wrapped over them anyway. He closed his eyes and he thought about what the doctor had said and he felt a deep, heavy sense of regret. A sense of hopelessness, a sense of grief, a sense of loss. For some reason, he felt

as if something—or someone—important had been stolen from him and there was nothing he could do. He'd never felt such a void in his chest, where he could feel nothing but the horrors of unadulterated fear, pain, and despair.

*I'm in a lot of pain, Coach.*

Coach reached up and wiped the tears that were streaming down Alfred's cheeks. He hadn't even noticed they were there, and they were endless.

As promised, they took the tube out the next day. For a few minutes Alfred could do nothing but cough, and it hurt his ribs. But once he'd found his voice he asked for painkillers.

"My eyes are hurting," he said. His voice was hoarse and sounded alien.

"Doc! He wants painkillers."

Everything was still dark. But he was glad that Coach was there again. The pain began to die down half an hour after the medicine was administered. Alfred tried to smile at whoever it was giving him the meds, but he wasn't sure if it really looked like a smile. It was probably more of a grimace.

"How do you feel, champ?"

"Like shit."

"You look like shit, too."

He laughed, but that hurt his ribs, too.

"I still can't see anything," he said quietly then. "It's really scary."

"Hey, don't worry. The doc said that you'll get your vision back."

"He said that I'll get some of my vision back. If I don't lose it permanently." Alfred reached up and felt the gauze covering his eyes. He hated it. "What happened? How did I...how did I get beat so bad? I wasn't supposed to lose."

“Don’t think like that, Al. It’s not your fault. Dangers like this are inherent for a fighter.”

“Come on, you know that’s not true. This happened because Braginsky wanted it to happen, and he’s stronger than me.”

Coach didn’t respond. He couldn’t. There was nothing he could’ve said to comfort Alfred at that moment, and he knew it.

“He could’ve just knocked me out. But he didn’t want to.” This time, Alfred felt the tears. Everything around him was crashing. He grasped feebly at the bedsheets in an attempt to find something concrete in this suddenly dark, abstract world. “He wanted to leave his mark on me. I shouldn’t have fought him. I never should’ve convinced myself that I could win.”

“Hey, Al—”

“Now I might never see again. I might never fight again. My name will just go down on the list of people Ivan the Terrible’s taken out. Nobody will remember it. I’m not gonna be the champion, Coach. I’m not gonna be the champion I’ve always dreamed of being.”

Alfred was sobbing now. The tears were stinging and it hurt his ribs but he couldn’t stop. Everything he’d worked for, everything he’d dreamed of, was slipping through his invisible fingers. Since he’d woken up and heard the doctor’s voice, he’d been holding back. Being brave because that’s what it meant to be a hero. But his bravery had run out and he was terrified and sad and he needed to cry, even with his sightless eyes.

“I’m sorry, Alfred.”

Coach put his hand over Alfred’s.

“I’m so sorry.”

Alfred’s sight didn’t improve over the next week. Each day Dr. Laurinaitis would come in and check up on him, have a nurse give him medicine and change the gauze around his eyes, and chat with him for a little bit. Alfred liked the doctor a lot. Coach visited him almost every day, and Lizzie occasionally came with him.

“Hey, Alfie. How you doing? We miss you at the gym,” she said. She was the only person other than his mother who called him by that nickname. Her hands were very smooth when they touched his cheek.

He quickly came to the conclusion, after crying for a few days, that tears didn't solve anything. He tried to pick up the broken pieces of his pride and piece them back together, but it was hard when he couldn't see anything and could eat nothing but liquids and mashed up food like a baby. Still, after the first few days, Alfred became determined to change his outlook and fix himself. He would feel waves of despair crashing into him, and be hopeless for an hour or so, before forcing himself to get his shit together and smile just for the sake of smiling. It was how he survived in that hospital bed, in his blindness, day after day.

"Al!" Coach bellowed about a week after he'd woken up.

"What? What?"

"I have the best surprise for you ever."

"The best? Like, ever?"

"Yes!" He heard Coach stomping around the bed like a child. That was another reason Alfred had forced the smile back to his face—because he knew it would help Coach, who would never have dared to admit that he was having trouble dealing with this, too. "But close your eyes, it's a surprise."

"Ha ha, you're so funny, boss."

"Drum roll, please."

Alfred began tapping his hands against the bed and rolling his tongue as best he could.

"And...ta-da!"

A hand, smaller and more slender than Coach, grabbed Alfred's. It was a hand that, even if he couldn't see it, he would've recognized anywhere.

"No way!" he cried. "Mattie!"

"Hey, Al. Long time no see, eh, bro?"

It was Alfred's brother, Matthew. He and Alfred looked almost identical, but Matthew was a little bit softer, looked a little bit kinder, a little bit gentler, with lighter hair and darker eyes. And he, unlike Alfred, wore a pair of round, thin glasses. It was easy to tell them

apart, even though they were twins, but it was also easy to tell that they were brothers. Matthew's smile, delicate voice, warm presence, had always been the best way to make Alfred feel comfortable, safe, loved, soothed. From the days of their wild youth, Matthew had proven himself the only person capable of calming Alfred—of bringing him back to earth when he was stuck in the clouds, of putting on Band-Aids and promising not to tell the grown-ups when he got into useless fights, of reminding Alfred that no matter where he was or what he was doing, he had a best friend.

He really wished that he could see his face.

"I missed you, Alfred."

"Same. Though I wish our reunion didn't have to be like this. Pretty morbid, don't you think?"

Matthew lived in Toronto, and while it wasn't too far from New York, they didn't see each other much. He was busy with professional hockey the same way that Alfred was busy with MMA. He could hardly express how happy he was to see (in a sense) Matthew. There was nobody he wanted to be with him more.

"Eh, I kinda knew it would happen eventually."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You know what I mean."

They laughed together the same way they used to when they were kids pulling pranks, telling jokes, concocting convoluted lies to tell the adults that tried to control their lives.

"Hey, dude, I know this is weird to ask, but would you mind changing the wrap over my eyes? The nurse just probably forgot. Coach has seen it enough times, he probably knows how to do it."

"Sure thing."

Alfred felt Matthew's fingertips pressing against the clammy skin of his face as he lifted the gauze from his eyes. When the gauze was gone, and his eyes were allowed this momentary fresh air, Alfred's heart stopped. Because there, in front of him, he saw a blurred, fuzzy, distant-but-present image of his brother.

"M...Mattie..."

He blinked and the image became a bit clearer. It was most definitely his brother.

“Al? You look terrified, what’s the matter?” Coach appeared next to Matthew. He couldn’t see their facial expressions, but he could see them. He could see something.

“I can see you...”

“What?”

“Get the doctor!”

Dr. Laurinaitis called one of the hospital’s ophthalmologists to do an eye exam. Alfred’s twenty-twenty vision was no more, unfortunately, but he couldn’t find himself to be upset about it given the fact that he’d previously believed himself blind forever. His vision was now 20/70 (maybe even worse) in both eyes. Not enough to deem him legally blind, but enough that he would need glasses if he didn’t want the visual impairment to interfere with his daily life. As the doctors spoke to him, he couldn’t stop smiling. When he turned to his right, he could see Matthew and Coach’s blurred figures sitting there, and it made him so happy.

*Maybe I’ll be able to fight again.*

The next day, Matthew and Coach took his measurements themselves, and then went out and bought him a pair of glasses.

“Thick-rimmed and stylish, not like your lame ones, Mattie.”

“You always make me feel so loved.”

“Hey, now we’ll look even more like twins!”

“Great.”

It was Saturday. Alfred knew the date because there was a big basketball game that night. He was in his hospital bed, wearing his suave new glasses (he might as well make the best of this situation). Matthew was sitting across from him on the bed, and they were playing cards—poker. Matthew was winning by a landslide. The doctor had said that they wanted to keep him in the hospital for at least another week, to make sure there weren’t any complications

post-surgery or even any mental issues. So he was hunkering down and getting used to life in this hospital room, where Coach and Matthew occasionally came to visit and near the window there was an extra, empty bed.

*This isn't so bad, he constantly had to remind himself. Mattie's here. Coach comes to visit. My doctor's nice. They give me food in bed, and that's pretty awesome...*

"Hey, Mattie."

"What's up?"

"Do you think that even with my eyes fucked up like this, I'll be able to fight again?"

Matthew shrugged, his small smile and gentle expression unchanging. He was staring at his hand of cards.

"Maybe. There's always contact lenses."

"True."

"Do you want to fight again?"

Alfred was ready to respond. Yes, of course, of course I want to fight again. But when he opened his mouth to say the words out loud, they wouldn't come. He hesitated. Matthew looked up at him.

"You don't have to answer now."

They were interrupted by the door to the room gently opening. Dr. Laurinaitis poked his head in, his brown hair tied back and his smile genuine.

"Afternoon, boys," he greeted. "Is this a bad time?"

"Nah, come on in."

"I'll make it quick. We just had a patient referred from the emergency room—he's not in critical condition and doesn't need any surgery done, but does need some inpatient treatment. We thought we'd put him in this room with you, but I wanted to make sure you don't mind first."

"Oh, 'course not. The more the merrier, I guess."

“Right. Well, there’s a curtain to separate the beds if either of you ever chooses to use it. He’ll be in shortly.”

“Looks like you’ll have company from now on,” Matthew said as Dr. Laurinaitis left the room.

About an hour later, there was another knock on the door. This time, when it opened, a group of nurses came in wheeling a man in a wheelchair. He was wearing a hospital gown, like Alfred, and he couldn’t have been much older—mid-twenties, not more. He was awake and he had a bored, almost angry expression on his face. Unkempt tendrils of light blonde hair swept over his forehead. His skin perfectly smooth, his lips pursed and scowling, his eyebrows thick and groomed. His emerald eyes bright and glimmering. Alfred noticed tattoos along his collarbone in sharp zigzag designs, and both of his ears were lined with small silver piercings.

He didn’t say a word when they rolled him in. Still didn’t say anything when they helped him into the bed next to Alfred’s and fluffed his pillow. That bitter expression on his face was unbreakable, his silence weighing more heavily than Alfred would’ve expected. There was something in the way that he moved, something in the way his eyes looked slowly, as if in a daze, around the room. Everywhere but at Alfred. Looking but not seeing. There was an intensity in him that seemed like it was dulled by undeniable exhaustion and frailty. He looked exactly like one might expect a hospital patient to look, even though Alfred had no idea what he was in for. He didn’t look injured. Just pale and irritable and a bit fragile. Maybe a bit heartbroken.

And he was, without a doubt, the most beautiful person Alfred had ever seen.



The young man in the hospital bed was staring out of the window. He was sitting oddly straight, hands in his lap, head turned ever so slightly toward the light. The end-of-summer sun was setting and he was watching it crawl behind the horizon, while Alfred watched him. He thought for a moment about the basketball game he was about to miss. But it was only for a moment, before he was drawn once again to the young man in the hospital bed. The sun was lighting up his silhouette in sharp curves and lines and from the right angle, he looked like a painting. His cheeks were sunken, there were bags under his eyes, his body was shaking, he was fidgeting with his fingers. Like there was an itch he couldn't scratch. Alfred tried not to make his infatuation obvious. But he didn't have to try terribly hard. The young man wasn't in the same dimension.

Matthew apologized and said that he had to go back. Coach was letting Matthew crash at his place until Alfred was discharged, and he'd offered to cook dinner.

"Sorry to leave you for the night," he said as he gathered his stuff.

"That's all right. I'll survive."

"Knock on wood. I'll come by tomorrow."

"See ya."

He closed the door behind him, leaving Alfred in this heavy, visible silence. It encased him like a glass cage. But he wasn't alone in the cage. The young man in the hospital bed was there with him. Alfred's jaw was starting to hurt him and his eyes were aching. He wanted to take his glasses off (he still wasn't quite used to them) but he hesitated, because taking them off would mean being unable to make out all the little details about the young man that were so enticing, so beautiful. The way his eyebrows moved, the stray tendrils of his hair crushed against the pillow behind him, the slightest movements of his chapped lips, the pallor in his cheeks, the disjointed, random twirls of his fingers. The glimmer of the piercings on his ears, so light and pretty and somehow natural.

Alfred wanted to say hello. After he said hello, he reasoned, he would take off his glasses.

“Hi,” he said.

The gaze of the young man shifted a bit. Just a bit, toward him. But he didn’t move his head, didn’t change his position, didn’t respond.

“Guess we’re stuck here, huh?”

The young man blinked.

“Probably for very different reasons.”

Finally, as Alfred ran his mouth, the young man turned to look at him. Those green eyes were daggers.

“I’m Alfred. Alfred Jones.” He gave his best smile. The one his mother had taught him, when he’d been younger, claiming that should he perfect it, it would be a foolproof means of getting into even the most icy heart. “Even under these morbid circumstances, it’s nice to meet you.”

“You’re one of those, aren’t you?” the young man said quietly. His voice was low and ragged and didn’t quite match his lips. His accent was British.

“Huh?”

“One of those. There seems to be a lot of you in America. You know, the ones who love to hear themselves talk.”

“I mean, not really,” Alfred replied. “I guess I’ve heard overly friendly before, though.”

“I’m sure.” The young man narrowed his eyes and puckered his lips. It was the kind of irritated, patronizing expression you would have to practice in front of a mirror to perfect. It was condescending perfection.

“Not from around here?”

“My, how could you tell?” he said dryly. “My accent? The fact that I understand the meaning of keeping one’s distance? Or maybe even my ability to read body language?”

Alfred couldn't help it. He laughed.

"Ah, of course, my sparkling sense of humor." The man rolled his eyes and turned back to the window. "Dead giveaway every time."

"Just the fact that you mentioned America like someplace foreign. The accent was a good clue, too," Alfred smiled.

"Of course." The more that he spoke, the more tired his voice sounded. Like it had a time limit, and was slowly reaching the end of it.

"Sunset's pretty, isn't it," Alfred said. The man shrugged.

"Just like any other sunset from any other place."

"Sorry, am I bothering you?"

"If I say yes, will you be quiet?"

Alfred's smile was shaky now. He relented and took off his glasses. Just as he did, his injuries decided to flare up. His eyes, his jaw, his rib—he felt a rush of pain in every spot. It was blinding. He dropped his glasses and closed his eyes and grit his teeth and grasped the bedsheets. He waited for the rush to pass, and then in his dizziness, managed to take the pills at his bedside. He kept his eyes closed and leaned back against the pillow.

"Sorry," he repeated, more quietly this time. "Just figured that we might be here together for at least a few days. Wanted to introduce myself. Introductions not common where you're from?"

"Yes, on my planet, introductions are terribly rare. A sign of weakness, really." Somehow, the man's voice sounded gentler. Alfred laughed again. The bout of pain had exhausted him. He wanted to sleep.

"You're funny."

"I'm glad you're of the rare breed that thinks so."

Alfred opened his drowsy eyes. The man was looking at him again. The light pouring in from outside had almost completely dimmed.

"Arthur," he finally said. "Arthur Kirkland."

“Nice to meet you, Arthur.”

He closed his eyes and he fell asleep, and he was thinking about Arthur Kirkland’s piercings.

Alfred woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of footsteps. Arthur was walking, hospital gown and all, to the door. That much he could see even without his glasses.

“Where’re ya goin’?” he asked groggily.

“To the loo.”

He was gone for five minutes. By the time he came back, Alfred was falling back into his uneasy slumber, interrupted every few hours by the inevitable bursts of pain. Just as he was about to doze off, he heard strange sounds coming from the bed beside him. He managed to sit up in bed and grope for his glasses, only to find Arthur Kirkland standing on his bed, naked, using his hospital gown to cover up the smoke alarm on the ceiling.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Alfred hissed, suddenly wide-awake. He was whispering for some reason. His face was hot, his heart was racing, his skin tingling. Even in the darkness, he could see in excruciating detail Arthur’s body. Only hours ago, he had just learned his name, and now he felt like he was intruding somehow. Arthur’s body was slender and lean and not at all muscular, and his limbs were long and he moved with such innate grace that he appeared much taller than he was. Even though he was standing on his toes. Everything about him seemed perfectly shaped, perfectly sculpted.

*His ass is a fucking masterpiece.*

“Just what it looks like. Covering up the smoke alarm.”

“Okay, but *why*? It’s like, three in the morning.”

“I’m well aware.” Arthur tied a few knots, working with his tongue sticking out, before the gown was securely covering the alarm. “I need a goddamn cigarette.”

“You’re gonna smoke a cigarette? In a hospital room? Are you insane?”

“Of course. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

“You know there are cameras, right?”

“Blimey, you’re right. This hospital room must be dulling my senses.”

Arthur got off the bed. Alfred couldn’t tear his eyes away, as Arthur grabbed one of the extra bedsheets in the corner of the room. As it so happened, the camera was near the door, reachable via Alfred’s bed.

“Alfred, was it? Sorry, Alfred, but you’ll have to tolerate me for a few moments. In fact, you should be thankful. I’m absolutely dreadful to be around without my smokes.”

“Hey, wait—”

Arthur clambered up onto Alfred’s bed in his naked glory and reached up to cover the camera the same way he’d covered up the smoke alarm.

“You think they’re not gonna know that you covered it up?”

“Of course they will. As long as they don’t know why, I couldn’t give less of a shit.”

“They’ll definitely smell the smoke when they come in tomorrow.”

“My word against theirs.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Right you are, my young American friend.”

When he was finished with the camera, after Alfred had gotten a nice close-up look at everything he had to offer, Arthur hopped back down. Alfred’s face must have been the color of a tomato, and the heat in his skin was almost unbearable. He crossed his legs instinctively and made sure the blanket was covering his lower body well enough. He watched as Arthur reached into the bag he had on the bedside table and pulled out a long mint packet. When he opened it, there were no mints. Just some cigarettes.

“You’re sneaky,” Alfred laughed. Arthur scoffed, and then pulled out a lighter.

“They weren’t very diligent.”

He slumped back down on the bed, lit his cigarette, and took a long, elegant drag. Alfred felt like he was watching a slow, detailed scene of a movie. The way he moved, the way he was sitting leisurely on his bed, the way he brought the cigarette to and from his lips, was precise and calculated and graceful. Alfred had only smoked a few cigarettes in his life, and had detested every moment of it. But somehow it didn't seem so bad when Arthur did it. Regardless of the fact that it was in a hospital room.

"Besides, what are they going to do if they catch me?" he mused. "Throw me out? Be my guest."

He laughed smoothly, and glanced back at the window. The moon was hiding behind the clouds. It was probably going to rain tomorrow. Then his gaze shifted back to Alfred, who had been shamelessly watching.

"Care for a smoke?"

"No, thanks. I don't smoke."

"Why you'd subject yourself to an extra five or so years of life is beyond me," he said with another drag. "I'd rather die at 30 than have never smoked a cigarette."

"That's kind of a weird thing to say in a hospital."

"True enough."

Arthur, after less than a day of knowing him, was an enigma to Alfred. He'd seemed so withdrawn, even hostile, when he'd first arrived. Responding to Alfred with his cold, sarcastic retorts and patronizing expressions. Now, in the middle of the night and for no real reason, he'd been able to strip naked and cover the smoke alarm just to have a cigarette in a hospital room. He was speaking regularly, his voice full of vigor, in a completely different manner than he had been earlier. Maybe he'd recovered from the shock of being admitted to the hospital. Maybe he, like Alfred, had come to terms with his situation (whatever that was). Or maybe he really was as crazy as he claimed.

"You're weird," Alfred said.

"Am I? Am I really?" Arthur smiled and raised his eyebrows. Amused. "I'm sure you have your quirks. There has to be a good reason for your admittance here. I take it you didn't just fall down a

flight of stairs. You don't appear that clumsy of a guy to me."

Alfred noticed more tattoos that he hadn't seen under the hospital gown. Rings on his biceps that whirled up toward his shoulders. Words that he couldn't make out scribbled onto his right thigh.

"No, you're right, I'm not."

"Sure you don't want a smoke?"

He held out the cigarette. Alfred tried to hide his smile as he reached his hand out. Arthur handed him the almost-finished cigarette. He brought it to his lips and breathed in the toxins until he began to cough. Arthur laughed at him and took his cigarette back. He finished it, crushed it on the bottom of the bed, and stuck it back in the mint box. Then he got onto his bed and took off the gown from the smoke alarm and draped it over his body. Alfred was almost upset. He climbed again onto Alfred's bed and removed the sheet on the camera. The room smelled like cigarette smoke now.

"See? No harm done. But snitch on me and I'll have your head on a platter, yeah?"

"I won't snitch on you," Alfred laughed. "Do I seem like that kind of guy?"

"Fucked if I know what kind of guy you are. I've known you for a total of six hours."

Arthur went back to his bag and pulled out a box of wrapped chocolates. He popped them into his mouth, one after the other after the other, and without warning threw a few in Alfred's direction.

"I may be an asshole, but I'm not totally rude," he said before Alfred could even ask. "Besides, Americans love to eat, don't they? It's probably miles better than your shitty American chocolate."

When he'd finished the box, he sat down on the bed for a few moments. Now evidently aware that Alfred was watching him. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Arthur stood up again and walked to the door.

"Now where are you going?"

"To the loo."

“But you just went.”

Arthur didn't respond. He left and returned after five minutes.

“Fucking hell, I hate the aftertaste of chocolate,” he grumbled. He got into bed and, without a word, rolled over and fell asleep. Leaving Alfred confused, intrigued, and madly inspired.

As expected, Dr. Laurinaitis chewed Arthur out the next day. Alfred pretended that he wasn't listening, sticking his headphones over his ears and tinkering with his phone. But he turned the music down low and listened to the conversation and sneaked glances at Arthur, illuminated in the daylight, as he took the doctor's lecture. It seemed that Arthur had really calmed down now. He wasn't as desolate and quiet as he'd been when he first arrived, but he wasn't as eccentric and energetic as he'd been that night. His sarcasm, though, was still bright and sharp. It was, Alfred assumed, his native tongue.

“No more smoking,” Dr. Laurinaitis said. He wasn't angry. More exasperated.

“Yeah, that's fine, deny me of any capacity to be happy. That's what hospitals are for, right?”

“Arthur, we're just doing what we believe is best for you. And you're not the only one in this room, you know.”

“He doesn't care. You don't care, do you, Alfred?” Arthur screamed, thinking that was the only way to get Alfred's attention since he was wearing the headphones. Alfred put them around his neck and smiled up at the doctor. He loved it when Arthur said his name, let it roll off his tongue like music notes.

“Nope. I'm a toughie.”

“There you have it.”

“No smoking on hospital grounds, all right?” the doctor sighed.

“Fine.”

When he was gone, Arthur gave a soft grumble and reached into his bag. There was another box of chocolates. Alfred still hadn't tried the ones that Arthur had thrown at him.

“Bloody uptight arses, I'm fucking knackered enough without my



fucking cigarettes.” He began popping the chocolates into his mouth like they were pills. Alfred tried to hide his laughter, but Arthur was more observant than that. He glared at him. “And just what are you laughing at?”

“You really like chocolate, don’t you,” Alfred said.

“I doubt you’re one to judge, love.”

“Oh, I’m totally not. Take me to McDonald’s with unlimited money and time and I’ll probably eat the whole restaurant in one sitting.”

“Of course you would.” Arthur was fidgeting with his fingers again. After he finished his box of chocolates, he stood up from the bed.

“Going to the bathroom again?”

“Yes.”

“Chocolates really make you shit, huh.”

“Mhmm.”

When he came back, coughing, he sat on the bed and hugged his knees to his chest and stared out the window. It was raining, and he was watching the drops stream down the glass.

“Why are you always staring out the window like that?” Alfred heard himself ask. He hadn’t really meant to. “It’s always the same view, you know.”

Arthur shrugged.

“I really want a cigarette,” he said quietly.

“They won’t let you go outside for one?”

“Not allowed to leave hospital grounds. For fear that my insanity might spread to the poor, unsuspecting civilian population,” Arthur groaned. “I can’t very well blame them.”

“You don’t seem that insane to me.”

“You must be an awful judge of character.”

“My brother always told me that I’m a great judge of character, even if I act oblivious a lot of the time,” Alfred winked.

Arthur scoffed, but Alfred could see the small smile playing on his lips. He wanted to see a full smile. He imagined that it must have been gorgeous.

“So if you’re not crazy, why are you here?” Alfred ventured.

“As it happens, that’s none of your business.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Here, I’ll go first.”

Alfred managed, despite the light sting in his rib, to get out of bed. He hadn’t gotten out of bed much and his legs were shaky and he had to grab onto the bedpost for a moment to keep from falling. Once he’d found his balance once more, he adjusted his glasses and stumbled over to Arthur’s bed.

“Hey, just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Consider it payback for last night.” Alfred smiled and got onto Arthur’s bed, despite Arthur’s angry expression and protests. Sat cross-legged across from him. Then he leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. “So. Wanna know how I got these scars?”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### 5

Arthur looked as if he'd smelled something disgusting, his nose wrinkled and his brow furrowed, while Alfred made himself comfortable on his bed.

"Are all Americans this bloody rude?"

"Come on, you can't tell me you're not curious," Alfred insisted. "You don't wanna how I almost went blind? Why I can only eat baby food? Why I can barely walk?!"

"You were walking just fine a moment ago."

"Look." Alfred took off his glasses and squinted. "I can't even see the shape of your eyes. Or your angry little face."

"I beg your—"

"Before, I could see so clearly I probably could've pointed out your pores."

"Unfortunately for you, my skin is perfect, so no."

"Ask me how many fingers you're holding up."

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Okay, I can at least tell that you're not holding up any fingers."

"Look at that, it's a miracle."

"You're such a bummer, you know that?" Alfred put his glasses back on and leaned against the wall, but didn't leave.

He liked the way that Arthur talked, with such bitterness and smoothness. He was so sour and sarcastic and unlikeable, which was perhaps why Alfred was so enticed. He was like a challenge, and Alfred was never one to shy away from a challenge. There was something in his eyes that betrayed the otherwise belligerent

demeanor of his body and face; a warm, friendly flame surrounded by emeralds, and it was that flame Alfred had seen first and maybe the reason he'd been so insistent on befriending Arthur. He couldn't have been as insolent and as plain angry as he seemed. In all of Alfred's life, he had hardly met anyone who immediately showed their true colors. Except for himself.

"How about this," he said. "Would you mind listening to me while I rant? Could get some things off my chest."

"Well, as you all like to say so much, 'it's a free country.' Even if I refused you'd probably talk anyway. Go ahead."

Alfred ate one of the chocolates that Arthur had given him. It was good, chewy, filled with caramel.

"I wanted to be a hero when I was little."

"Didn't realize this was going to be your life story."

"It's not, don't worry," Alfred smiled. "Do you know what MMA is?"

"Mixed Martial Arts. Of course."

"You know the UFC?"

"Vaguely. I only know the name of one fighter, the one that everyone knows."

Alfred felt a churn in his stomach.

"The champion right now, I think. Ivan the Terrible. I don't actually know his real name."

"Yup, that's him." Alfred smiled because it was the best way to hide his discomfort. Discomfort that Arthur probably wouldn't have noticed anyway.

"Are you a fighter too, then?"

"Yeah. When I was younger I thought I would be cool and fight off local thugs. You know, stupid kids who deal drugs and steal purses from old ladies. I wanted to be a hero and help people out. Five years ago Coach—my coach, I mean—caught me and said that I had a lot of potential. He offered to train me."

“So you were injured in a fight? Pretty badly, too,” Arthur said.

“Against Ivan the Terrible.”

“Ah.”

Alfred couldn't tell if Arthur was actually interested, or if he was just feigning it. He kept talking anyway.

“I thought I could beat him. I'm like a prodigy, or whatever. That's what Coach says. I'm young and inexperienced but I'm good. Real good. So I thought I had a chance, you know?”

Alfred was losing himself as he spoke. He hadn't planned on going quite this far.

“I didn't stand a chance, though. He could've knocked me out like any normal opponent, but I think he holds some kind of grudge against me. Or maybe he just sees me as a threat to his title. Who fucking knows. He decided that he wanted to really fuck me up. He punched me here on both eyes and gave me two blowout fractures.”

He pointed to the corners of his eyes, where he could still feel Ivan's knuckles cracking his skull. Arthur was finally looking at him, really looking.

“He also broke my jaw. And a rib. I couldn't see anything for a week. And now I need glasses.”

“That must be an adjustment.”

“I guess it's not so bad. Glasses make me look smarter than I am,” he replied. “The biggest adjustment was just realizing that I'd lost.”

“I take it you haven't experienced that many times.”

“Nope. I haven't lost a single fight in the UFC since I started fighting professionally. So I thought this would be a piece of cake. It's weird, coming to the realization that you're not really the best. God, I sound like a fucking prick.”

“A bit.”

“I don't know if I'll ever fight again.” Alfred's smile trembled and he mimicked Arthur, hugging his knees to his chest. “That's actually pretty scary.”

“You’re probably smarter than you give yourself credit for,” Arthur said. “And I’m sure a little loss of vision won’t stop you. You don’t seem like that kind of person.”

“But last night you said you didn’t know what kind of person I was,” Alfred said.

“Did I?” Arthur shrugged. “Well, I’ve changed my mind.”

“So what kind of person am I, then?”

“Let’s see.” He leaned back and narrowed his eyes and looked intensely at Alfred’s face. Down at his chest, his legs, then back up. “You’re most definitely stronger than most. Mentally and physically. I can tell just by looking at your body and the look in your eyes. And you come off as extremely stupid, but you’re not.”

“Ouch.”

“Hey, take it as a compliment. You’re smart. Maybe not book-smart, or whatever, but you said it yourself. You’re a good judge of character and you can read a situation well, even when you act like you can’t.”

“Hmm.”

“How did I do?”

“Pretty well, I think.”

“You think? You don’t know yourself at all?”

“I feel like I’m the hardest person to read. I’m way unpredictable. Do you know yourself well enough to really describe who you are to another person?”

Arthur didn’t respond. He just looked at Alfred and blinked slowly. His eyelashes were thick and dark. They sat in the silence the same way sleepy children might.

“So? Still not gonna tell me your story?” Alfred finally said.

“It’s not as interesting or dramatic as yours, I’m afraid.”

“That’s okay. I wanna know. Might make it easier for us to understand each other, being stuck here and all.”

“I suppose I can’t argue with your logic.”

“I mean, if it makes you feel uncomfortable since we hardly know each other, you don’t have to—”

“I have bulimia nervosa.”

“What?”

“I passed out during a photoshoot and was sent to the emergency room. When they realized I had bulimia, they decided to keep me their prisoner. They’re going to put me through therapy and everything.”

“Wait, slow down, you...”

“I eat a fuckton very rarely and then I throw it all up. And my body hates me for it.” Arthur sighed and began examining his fingernails. Alfred suddenly noticed scratches on his knuckles. They were out of place. “That’s what the doctors say, at least. Bollocks if you ask me.”

“Why?”

“They act as if I don’t know it’s bad for me. Like they’re trying to convince me of something. Of course I know it’s bad for me. And I don’t enjoy it, not at all. What kind of twisted bastard would? But it’s what I need to do and it’s the result that matters. The end justifies the means, as they say.”

“Why the hell would you need to do something like that?”

“To meet the standards. Of the industry, and my own.”

“What industry?”

“I model.”

“Oh.”

Alfred understood now the overwhelming beauty he’d noticed in Arthur. The perfection of every feature, the grace of his movements, the elegance of his voice and the way he positioned himself and the sadness and the quiet, dull heartbreak.

“If I’m not good enough, then everything I’ve worked for goes down the drain. I have to stay thin. I’m already bad enough as is, I

shouldn't let it get any worse."

"That's crazy. You really have to do something like this to be 'good enough?' Whatever that means?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so."

Arthur glared.

"And just what do you know about any of this?"

"Not much, but I think if it means starving yourself and making yourself puke all the time, it has to be wrong."

"Well, *you're* wrong. I need to maintain a specific weight and figure. Otherwise I'm not worth anything. Do you know how many agencies could turn me down for looking like this?"

"Not worth anything? What?" Alfred couldn't help it. He laughed. Arthur glared at him harder and when Alfred saw his lower lip begin to tremble, he felt like a total asshole. "Shit, I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh at you. It's just bizarre."

"Obviously, for the likes of you it is. How on earth could you possibly understand?"

"It's just weird, thinking that someone like you does something like that to stay beautiful. Is beauty really the only way to measure worth?"

Arthur opened his mouth to respond, but didn't say anything. Alfred almost regretted saying anything, because now he could see the tears gathering on the brims of Arthur's eyes.

"Don't get me wrong. You're stunning. But that's not all there is to you. And if modeling agencies can't see that, they're not worth your time."

And then Arthur smiled. It set him on fire, as fleeting as it was. There was a small, charming gap between his two front teeth. The wrinkles in his face relaxed and his eyes glimmered. It wasn't a happy smile. It was sad. But it was genuine.

"It's a good thing there are optimists out there like you to contrast pessimists like me," he said. "I wish your outlook were more



realistic.”

“Isn’t it?”

Arthur rested his chin on his knees and stared off into space. His breathing was shallow and discreet. Alfred had never seen anyone in such a blatant, beautiful state of despair before. It tore up his heart.

“Sometimes being good enough isn’t what people tell you it is when you’re a child.”

Alfred decided not to say anything. He couldn’t, not when he looked into Arthur’s broken eyes. Not when Arthur looked so emotionally exhausted and his eyelids were drooping and his lips were quivering and there were still tears on his eyes. Alfred didn’t know him well enough to be able to comfort him or console him, as much as he wished he did. It would’ve been like a stranger telling him to smile, perk up, not be so down, and Alfred didn’t want to tell Arthur how to feel.

*But your smile really is something.*

“Sorry, but I think I’d like to sleep for a bit,” Arthur murmured. “You look pretty knackered yourself.”

“Yeah. Sleep is probably a good idea.”

They exchanged well-intentioned smiles, the smiles of two hospital patients who shared tattered dreams and chocolates and clandestine cigarettes in a sense of camaraderie, before Alfred went back to his bed and they both pulled the covers up and fell asleep.

Arthur woke up much earlier than Alfred did. The doctor came in a few minutes after he’d woken up and explained to him, in hushed tones so as not to wake up the sleeping patient in the other bed, what his treatment was going to be like. Individual therapy once every other day, and group therapy every day. Arthur said nothing, forcing himself to hold back the angry retorts on the tip of his tongue. He had to continuously remind himself that the doctor was only doing what he believed best, though he despised the sound of any type of ‘treatment.’

“I’m sorry, Arthur. Oh, but this might help—you have a visitor.

Want me to send him in?"

"A visitor? All right, fine."

In the blank space between the doctor's exit and his visitor's entrance, Arthur stole a glance at Alfred. He looked so very different in his sleep. The constant smile was replaced by small, slightly parted lips. Glimmering, too-bright sky eyes closed and eyelids fluttering. It was almost surreal, seeing someone as bright and loud and outgoing as Alfred in this vulnerable, quiet state. He looked smaller and younger in his sleep. But he looked sadder, too. He must have been terribly sad in his consciousness, too, but sleep made it more difficult to hide.

When Kiku walked into the hospital room, Arthur heaved a sigh of relief. He'd been afraid for a moment that it would've been a different visitor. Kiku noticed Alfred and walked quietly to Arthur's bed. They closed the curtain, and then Kiku sat down on the chair beside Arthur's bed. He looked positively exhausted, as if he'd been starving himself and staying up all night. Arthur was glad to see him.

"You look well," Kiku said.

"Really? You look terrible."

"I meant to visit you earlier, but the doctors said I should wait a day or two. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. Especially you. It's not a big deal."

"No, that's not what I mean." Kiku sighed and closed his eyes for a few moments. Gathering his thoughts and formulating them into words that were sitting reluctantly on his thin lips. "I'm sorry that I didn't see this before."

Arthur looked away. He didn't want to have this conversation.

"I'm around you all the time. I should've noticed that something was wrong."

"I got very good at hiding it, didn't I?"

"You could've said something, you know. Don't you trust me?" Kiku was never a touchy, sentimental person. This was one of the few times in their now six-year relationship that Arthur had seen a crack in his put-together, pristine shell. "I might have been able to help."

“It’s not about trust. It’s that nobody else understands. I know it’s not normal—so I suppose you might call me a hypocrite. But not even you could have helped me.”

Arthur wasn’t sure that he meant that.

“I’m sorry that I drove you to do something as horrible as this.”

“Please, it’s not your fault,” Arthur said. He tried his best to smile. “It’s just how it is. Blame society, blame the modeling industry, blame my fucked up head, blame whatever or whomever you’d like. But the fact is that I’m like this now.”

“It must have been so hard for you, this whole time.”

“Sure. But this is all I know how to do to be able to stand looking at myself in the goddamn mirror.” Arthur leaned back against the pillow and looked out the window. He still wasn’t sure why his gaze was drawn there. There was nothing out there in New York City that enticed him much more than what was inside the hospital room. “It’s the only way I know how to survive in this body.”

Kiku had brought him some more chocolate, a Sherlock Holmes book, a few fashion magazines, and an embroidery set to help him pass the time. He promised that he would try to visit every day and, in the meantime, set his affairs here and overseas in order.

“Naturally, I’ll cancel everything you had booked for at least the next few weeks. I’ll try to reschedule, but...well, you shouldn’t worry about that. Just concentrate on getting better.”

“Fucking hell, my body couldn’t have waited until next week to break down on me?” Arthur grumbled. “Then at least I’d be in London for this ordeal.”

He said the words, but he didn’t quite believe them. If he’d passed out and been sent to the hospital in London, then he never would’ve met Alfred. Conversation surely wouldn’t have been as interesting back home.

*What a strange thing to think, he mused. I really must be going crazy after all.*

Chapter End Notes

I hope you are all enjoying it so far <3

see ya soooooon

xoxo

For the next week that they were stuck in this hospital room together, Alfred started noticing little things about Arthur. They didn't have any more conversations about their conditions and secrets, but it seemed that they were finding solace in each other's company. Alfred noticed after a few days that Arthur barely ever touched his meals. He would nibble at a few crackers, drink some juice, but leave the food generally uneaten. Then, in the middle of the night or at random points during the day, he would eat at least twenty chocolates at a time. And then, despite Alfred's protests, he would claim having to go to the bathroom (though he was undoubtedly aware that Alfred knew better than that) and be gone for up to ten minutes. Alfred figured that even if Arthur hadn't cracked and told him about the disorder, he would've figured it out from his odd eating habits anyway. Arthur was right, after all. Alfred was smarter than he seemed, though his penchant for inappropriate jokes and sometimes embarrassing ignorance of world events might've dictated otherwise.

Once a day, after dinner, Dr. Laurinaitis would come in and take Arthur to his group therapy. Every time he came back, with his pursed lips and raised eyebrows, he would sit in bed and chuckle.

"Fucking hell, those sessions are so useless," he said one day. "They think they're helping me 'see past appearances.' You know, we all sit in a circle and talk about how much we hate being fat, and then we have a quack tell us that we're beautiful no matter what."

"Sounds just about what you'd expect from group therapy for eating disorders," Alfred laughed. "Doesn't seem like you're buying it."

"These people think they can get inside your head and tell exactly what you're thinking. Oh, this person was bullied for being fat. This person was dumped and feels responsible. This person saw it growing up. This person watches too much reality television."

He reached into his bag and took out a box of chocolates.

"They try to have conversations about body image. Kind of like what you were blabbering about the other day. Claiming that there's so much more to beauty than what's on the outside, but these people

who tell you these things...”

He paused and popped a chocolate into his mouth.

“...they have no idea what it’s even like. And it absolutely cracks me up.”

“They are just trying to help you.”

“I know, I must sound like a real arse. But like I said. They have no idea what it’s like.”

They were interrupted when Coach and Matthew walked into the room, making it just a little bit brighter.

“Your favorite visitors are here!” Coach announced.

“We’re his only visitors, Gil.”

“Whatever, we brought you chicken nuggets.”

“Yes!”

They dropped the McDonald’s bag onto his lap and sat down in the seats next to his bed. It had been a few days since they’d visited, and he was glad to see them. Coach was back to his usual self, well contrasted by Matthew’s soft-spoken, delicate demeanor. As Coach began his usual run of stupid jokes and irrelevant stories (Alfred had become an expert at seeming interested—he was similar, after all), he looked over at Arthur. And, not to his surprise, he was looking out the window. Curled up with his legs to his chest. Somehow, with more people in the room, he looked awfully lonely.

“Yo, Arthur. I wanna introduce you.”

“What?” Arthur whirled around, as if ripped away unceremoniously from a dream. His hair looked crazy and his eyes were bloodshot and still, he looked like a piece of art. His loneliness belonged in a museum.

“This is my brother, Matt, and my coach. Coach.”

“I have a name, champ.”

“Yeah, but I always forget it. My brain only has so much room.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Matthew said, his voice like honey. “Let

me just say that I respect you so much for being able to survive while sharing a room with this piece of shit.”

“Love you, too, bro.”

“I’m Arthur,” Arthur replied quietly.

“Hold on.”

As Coach and Alfred dug into the chicken nuggets, Matthew squinted and scrutinized Arthur with such intensity it was almost frightening. But Arthur looked unfazed.

“You’re not...you’re not Arthur Kirkland, are you?” Matthew finally said.

That, though, took him by surprise. He straightened up and his muscles loosened just a little bit. The look on his face was like a breath of fresh air, pure surprise and innocence and wonder.

“Y-yes, I am.”

“No, no!” Matthew’s face lit up in smiles and shimmering eyes and he stood up like a storm and rushed to Arthur’s bedside. “I can’t believe it! It’s really you! At first I hardly recognized you, but now I feel like an idiot.”

“You know him?” Alfred asked.

“I mean, not personally, but holy *shit*, you’re like, the best model in the world,” Matthew gushed. Even as his brother, Alfred hardly ever saw his brother this excited. He was blushing like a crushing high schooler.

“Come now, that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Arthur replied softly. “I’m not quite that big.”

“Well, you should be. And you will be. I have a feeling, eh?” Matthew’s smile grew broader and he kept leaning forward. It made Alfred want to laugh, the way he was smothering Arthur with such an air of obliviousness. “I’ve been following you since your first campaign with Ted Baker. You’re a stunning model.”

“That’s very kind of you to say.”

“Oh yeah, I remember,” Alfred interrupted. “You used to hide fashion magazines under the bed when we were younger.”

“Well, you know how it is. I like hockey, but I also like my Vogue.” Matthew took a deep breath, like he’d just run a marathon. “Wow, I can’t believe Arthur Kirkland is sharing a hospital room with my butthead brother.”

Alfred and Coach looked at each other and shrugged and continued eating their nuggets. Matthew and Arthur became preoccupied in conversation—although Matthew was generally quiet and soft-spoken, when he found something he was passionate about, it was difficult to get him to shut up. Arthur didn’t seem to mind, though, when Alfred’s gaze was inevitably drawn over to him. In fact, it was perhaps the brightest that Alfred had seen him in the four days since they’d met.

“I’m sorry, this must be so out of the blue, but...would you mind signing an autograph for me?” Matthew asked.

Arthur blinked and his lips parted, looking more like Matthew had just slapped him rather than asked for something as simple as his autograph. Alfred watched as the color flooded into his pale gray face and the corners of his lips turned up into a discreet but inspiring smile. Arthur was smiling. Really smiling. A smile that Alfred hadn’t quite seen yet. Or maybe he had seen it, but hadn’t been paying attention. He could see the gap in his teeth even from his bed.

“You want *my* autograph?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No, not at all...”

Arthur reached over to his bedside and pulled out a magazine from his ever-growing stack. He also had a pen handy—for crossword puzzles or hospital-blues-poems Alfred wasn’t sure. It was a copy of British Vogue, with Arthur adorning the cover. His pose was so stunning, so haunting, so beautiful, that it didn’t seem real.

“To Matthew—Best wishes, Arthur Kirkland.”

“That’s it?” Alfred called. Arthur jerked his head up.

“Well, yes.”

“You can’t write him, like, a cute little message?”

“Al, shut up.”



“Like?” Arthur asked.

“A quote or something. I don’t know. You’re the witty one.”

“I don’t even know him.”

“Oh, I got it! Compliment his hockey game.”

“Very well then, how about this. ‘To the world’s greatest hockey player—with love, from Arthur Kirkland.’”

“That’s amazing,” Matthew blushed.

“My pleasure.”

Alfred hoped that Matthew would stay a little bit longer, because he liked the way that Arthur smiled and became brighter and lighter and more musical when Matthew talked to him.

They left as the sun was setting and Alfred’s stomach was starting to hurt from the nuggets and the fries. When they were gone, he turned to Arthur and threw him his cheesy grin.

“So you’re a big-shot, huh?”

“Please,” he scoffed. “Your brother is just kind. I’m C-list at best.”

“What’s it like?” Alfred asked. Arthur furrowed his brow.

“What’s what like?”

“You know, the whole paparazzi, glamour thing.” Alfred drank his soda and slurped and watched Arthur cringe at the sound. “Being famous.”

“You’re asking the wrong person. I’m not much of a priority to the media, so they tend to let me be.”

“I mean, if Mattie recognized you, I bet lots of people would.”

“I’ll occasionally find myself followed by cameramen, because the media leeches like to drink the blood of anything that moves. But my shining personality and dazzling smile tend to send them on their way.”

“Was that...sarcasm?”

“Do I look like the type of person to dazzle with my smile?”

“I don’t know,” Alfred shrugged. “Dazzled me when I first saw it.”

He was met with silence. He looked up to see Arthur staring at him, eyes wide, scowling slightly. As if Alfred had said something shocking, something taboo.

“What? Did I say something?”

Arthur opened his mouth to respond and then quickly closed it and, with slightly less graceful than before fingers, took out another piece of chocolate. But he was hiding a smile. Alfred could tell now.

The next morning, it seemed, Alfred’s restlessness got the best of him. Arthur had noticed him starting to get fidgety in bed and walking around the room occasionally and asking the nurses for strange things—can I go outside, will you walk me around the hospital, can I have some sleeping pills? At this particular moment, while Arthur was trying to concentrate on his needlework, Alfred was tapping incessantly against the bed rail and moving so that the bed was creaking. As much as he tried to ignore it, it was dancing on his last nerve.

“Would you stop that already?” he finally hissed. “That tapping is driving me absolutely mad.”

“Sorry, I just can’t help it. I’m not used to sitting in bed and doing nothing,” Alfred said. Arthur hated the expression he was making. Brow knitted and smiling like a child who had done something wrong but could justify it with not knowing any better.

“Then figure out something to do. I might just murder you myself if you keep going.”

“What are *you* doing?”

“Embroidery. I doubt it’s something you’d enjoy.”

“Do you wanna play cards? Or, I don’t know...checkers, or chess, or something?”

“Chess? You play chess?”

“No, but you could teach me!”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“Oh, we could play battleship!”

“I’ll have to decline such a generous offer.”

“I can’t take just sitting here.”

“I thought Americans were famous for their unsurpassed ability to sit around and do nothing all day,” Arthur snickered.

“Well not me. Why do you think I like punching people so much? It helps me get out all this energy.”

“If you expect me to offer myself as your personal punching bag, you’re raving mad.”

“I got it!”

Alfred kicked the covers off and got out of bed. Arthur watched as he got down onto the hard hospital floor, on his hands and knees, and lifted himself up onto his hands. He was in push-up position, the muscles in his arms bulging.

“Oi, what the hell are you doing? Don’t you have a broken rib?”

“Eh, it’s fine. They’re just push-ups.”

He looked up and he winked and Arthur’s heart fluttered and then Alfred began to do push-ups in the hospital room.

“You’re off your nut.”

“Let’s see...how many...I can get...Count for me?”

“I’m busy.”

“Pleeeeeaaaaaseeee.”

“What, can’t even walk and chew gum at the same time?”

“Nope.”

“Blimey.”

Arthur exaggerated his sigh in some futile attempt to make

Alfred feel guilty, but set aside his needlework anyway.

“One, two, three,” he began. But he could hardly keep up with how quickly Alfred was doing push-ups that would have taken Arthur at least three times as long. He did it so effortlessly, breathing out with each push. He was tightening his muscles and even through the hospital gown, Arthur could see the definition in his arms, his shoulders, his back. He wished for a frightening moment that he could see the rest of it.

Alfred managed thirty before he collapsed, face-first, onto the tile floor.

“Fucking hell, mate. Are you sure you were injured at all?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

Panting, Alfred turned his head and looked up at Arthur. His cheek crushed against the floor and his eyelids drooping and his glasses crooked. He looked absolutely bizarre, and it was all Arthur could do to keep from bursting into laughter.

“You’re proper weird,” he said.

“At least I don’t spend my time with embroidery.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

The strange contentment and sunny lightheartedness that Arthur was feeling wasn’t destined to last for long, and he should’ve known it. Not even Alfred’s contagious laugh and forceful optimism were enough to curb Arthur’s inevitable falls and breakdowns. It was true that from the moment Alfred had introduced himself and essentially forced Arthur into conversing with him, engaging with him, befriending him, Arthur had found something new and exciting in this cold and clinical hospital room. It wasn’t at all what he’d been expecting when, half unconscious, the doctors had told him he was being admitted for inpatient therapy. There was a voice he could hear every day that irritated him, but helped him feel anything. There was a face he could see that blinded him with brightness, but reminded him of his ability to see in the first place. Alfred’s jokes were stupid and his stories were bizarre and he was too friendly and overbearing, but Arthur couldn’t say that he didn’t have his own issues. Like covering up the smoke alarms so he could smoke a cigarette in the middle of the night.

But not even Alfred could make him forget for long.

In the middle of the night about a week and a half after Arthur's admittance, after Arthur had finished another box of chocolates (Kiku would probably bring him another the next day), he was feeling out of control and filled with loathing. He couldn't understand his own reasoning—why couldn't he ever control himself? He should've known by then that just one chocolate often turned into the entire box, which would inevitably lead to him hating himself more than he already did, wondering, Why can't you fucking control yourself you stupid bastard?

Alfred was fast asleep and snoring a little bit. Arthur thought it would annoy him, but it didn't. At this point he was accustomed to it.

He stood up and made his way out of the room and to the bathroom. The nurses on the nightshift had been told, surely, to watch out for his trips to the bathroom. It was hard for him to manage to get there during the day sometimes. But at night, everyone was lethargic and it was darker and he could easily sneak to the loo unnoticed. Once he was inside, he turned on the sink again and leaned over the toilet and stuck his fingers into his mouth. He hated this sensation—it made him feel like an animal, hearing himself gag and having the disgusting aftertaste in his mouth. It left his throat burning and his stomach uncomfortable and sometimes his hands bleeding. And it always left him exhausted.

Something must have snapped in his body. Maybe it really did hate him for this.

He walked back into the room, holding back tears and limbs shaking. He tried to go back to his bed. But just as he passed the foot of Alfred's bed, he felt dizzy and nauseated. It was the same feeling he'd had at the photoshoot, just before he'd blacked out. The world spinning, flashing in colors and going black again. He felt a hammer bashing his skull and his knees weren't strong enough to support him. They buckled. He grabbed for the only thing nearby that might've kept him standing—the rails of Alfred's bed. But he had no strength to even support himself, and though he could hardly feel it, he heard himself crash to the floor. Then not just his head, but his entire body lit up in flames of pain and exhaustion. For a moment the coldness of the hospital tiles were refreshing and he closed his eyes and couldn't open them again. Then the hardness against his body became uncomfortable and intensely painful.

“Arthur? Wha...?”

He was fading in and out of consciousness now, and could hear the snippets of his name. Snippets of Alfred’s voice floating around his muddled head. He tried to say something—I’m fine, just need to lay here and close my eyes for a bit—but the words wouldn’t formulate.

“Hey, what happened?”

The ground shook like an earthquake and he closed his eyes more tightly. At least, he tried, but even that he didn’t have the energy for. Suddenly, in this hazy drunkenness, he felt arms wrapping around him and pulling him up. Warm, rough fingers against his sweating forehead and pushing away his matted hair. He tried so desperately to open his eyes, because he knew who was there and he wanted to see his face.

“Holy shit, you look terrible. And you’re burning up.”

He stopped trying and just let his eyes close. He was at least a little bit more comfortable that way. His stomach turned and shriveled and he heard himself groan when, like a feather, he was lifted into the air. For a few moments he felt terror and queasiness and the sensation of falling, falling, falling. But only for a little bit. Then he felt the hot, intense comfort of the hospital mattress (has it always been this comfortable?), and everything slowed down.

Fingers brushed his chapped, parted lips like a soft paintbrush running against a colorful canvas. They hovered at the edges of his fluttering eyelashes and down his cheek and back to his lips. He parted them like gates.

*am i in a dream*

“I’ll call the doctor,” the voice said. It was so quiet. Hoarse and gentle and suddenly unfamiliar. “And get you a glass of water.”

Even as he said it, he didn’t move. Kept his fingers pressed, then hovering, then pressing again, to Arthur’s lips. His cheek fitting into the palm of his hand like a pillow. He didn’t want him to leave, anyway. The water could wait. That voice, that hand, those fingers, were comfort enough, the one thing tethering him to reality as his body and his mind tried so desperately to tear him into an otherworldly state.

*i must be*

Then, like a slap to the face, the sensations were gone and the voice was gone. And everything went black.

*I don't want to wake up.*

Arthur opened his eyes and couldn't hear anything. The room was too bright and the sunlight pouring in from the window was too warm and he was sweating. But he was exhausted, too exhausted to feel anything other than indifference. He looked to his right and he saw two people talking. It was Alfred and Kiku. He couldn't see Kiku's face, and he couldn't hear what they were saying. He focused his entire being on watching Alfred's lips moving, smiling, could tell that he was laughing but couldn't hear it for some reason. His cheeks were red and his blue eyes were sparkling and his dirty blonde hair was wet—a shower?—and Arthur blinked to try and make his image clearer.

After a few seconds, the rest of his senses came back to him, and he could hear again. Just then, Alfred noticed him and his smile became warmer than the sunlight.

“Arthur! You're finally awake,” he grinned. Arthur just blinked at him. He didn't feel that he had enough energy to say anything. “Your manager and I were just talking while you were asleep. You've been out for a while.”

Kiku turned around and stood up and walked to Arthur's bedside. He smiled and bowed his head a bit.

“Mr. Jones has been taking good care of you, it seems,” Kiku said.

“Isn't this guy such a hoot? He calls me Mr. Jones,” Alfred laughed. “How are you feeling?”

“Awful. What happened?”

“Not really sure. Last night you came back from the bathroom and passed out before you could even get back to bed. Doc said it was severe dehydration.”

“Like what happened at the photoshoot,” Kiku said. “Please, Arthur. I wish you would be more careful.”

He tried to move and felt a light pressure in his arm. When he



looked down, he saw an IV and realized that he was doomed to be stuck in bed for a while yet. Not that he had the strength to do much else.

“Thank you for helping him, Mr. Jones.”

“Don’t mention it,” Alfred said. He was talking to Kiku, but he was looking at Arthur. “We’re friends now, so I have to help when I can.”

He appeared very much like he didn’t belong in a hospital room, vibrant and happy and energetic. Especially compared to Arthur, with his sunken eyes and papery skin and ragged breathing. Arthur wondered if he’d imagined, in the midst of his stormy nausea and hazy consciousness, the feeling of Alfred’s fingers on his lips. He reached up and touched his lips as if to make sure. It was like he could still feel Alfred’s fingertips there.

“Arthur, what’s wrong?” Kiku said. His voice was quick with concern.

“Huh?”

“You’re crying.”

Arthur reached up and touched his cheek. Sure enough, it was wet with tears that he hadn’t even noticed.

“Oh. I suppose I am.”

Before dinner a few days later, Dr. Laurinaitis came in for a quick check-up on Alfred. He had him sit up, had him stretch a little, had him go through a quick eye test. Making sure, he claimed, that his cognitive and movement functions were all still intact. A precaution. Arthur was asleep and the curtain was drawn.

“Eyesight still pretty bad, huh?” Dr. Laurinaitis asked.

“Yeah. I’m pretty much blind without my glasses,” Alfred laughed. He needed to laugh while he said it. It was his defense mechanism.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think your vision is going to improve after this. But really, we should be thankful that you didn’t go

completely blind.”

“Silver linings, I guess.”

“Don’t worry, Alfred. If you want to, you can still fight,” he smiled with a pat to Alfred’s shoulder. “Just pop in some contact lenses. Of course, it’s up to you. There’s always the risk that something like this, or worse, could happen again.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Obviously not a decision you have to make any time soon. But, luckily, I think you’re done here. It’s almost like you were never injured in the first place, apart from your eyes. I’m having you discharged in the morning.”

“Really? Sweet! Thanks, Doc.”

“You’re very welcome.” Dr. Laurinaitis moved to the door and gave one last smile. “I wish you the best of luck, Mr. Hero.”

That night, Alfred was almost shaking with excitement. He couldn’t sleep. It was still the middle of the night, a few hours from discharge, but he stood up and changed into his street clothes anyway. He wouldn’t be able to sleep. There was so much restlessness and pent-up frustration that he could hardly sit still for more than a few seconds.

But then he thought about returning to Coach, returning to training. Returning to a world where he was a failure, a disappointment. Those thoughts crushed the excitement. He would be returning to live, train, fight in the shadow of Ivan Braginsky. Would he ever be able to fight him again, he thought, would he ever even stand a chance?

He sat on his bed buttoning his shirt and playing Candy Crush to pass the time. He hoped that Arthur would wake up before he left, so that he could say a proper goodbye.

Then the thought that he would be leaving this hospital room really hit him. Leaving the hospital would mean leaving Arthur, alone here.

*Could he handle that?*

*Of course he could, who am I kidding. He doesn’t even like me that*

*much.*

Over the past week or so, Alfred and Arthur had become confidantes. Even when there was nobody else, they had each other. They had talked about so many things, made jokes, learned about each other without actually having to ask. Alfred felt like he had known Arthur his whole life. But he wasn't sure at all what Arthur thought of him. An irritating thorn in his side, maybe—someone who was always too loud when he tried to sleep. Someone who was way too optimistic and happy.

*Even though I'm not really. Not now.*

He wondered if Arthur were awake and just silent. He'd been a lot quieter since his blackout. More reserved. Although he still had something sarcastic to say every time Alfred opened his mouth.

But then he heard a strange sound coming from Arthur's bed. He couldn't see him with the curtain drawn, but he could hear it with painstaking clarity. Soft, choking sobs. Like he was trying to hold them back but couldn't. Sniffles, the creaking of the bed. Cautiously, Alfred stood from the bed and pulled the curtain back. Not all the way. Just enough to peek his head around.

Arthur was laying on his back in bed, eyes shut tightly and squeezing out tear after tear after tear, and one of his hands was covering his mouth. Alfred felt his heart stop beating and shrivel up. He had never seen anyone look so miserable—is that what he had looked like when he'd first been admitted to the hospital? When he could see and couldn't talk? When he thought he would never see again, never fight again?

The tears were like crystals shimmering against Arthur's pale skin, drops that symbolized without words something that Alfred couldn't understand. They streamed endlessly and defiantly. Alfred felt like he was seeing something that he shouldn't have been. Something taboo, or maybe something sacred, upon which his eyes weren't meant to fall. The moonlight made his face look like a doll's, even as it wrinkled and cried like a child.

"H...hey...Arthur," he said quietly. Arthur didn't open his eyes or stop crying. He just started shaking his head. "Hey, come on. Don't cry."

It made him cry harder. He couldn't muffle the breathless sobs anymore. He sounded so utterly broken, so shattered—reaching his

fingers out and trying to piece himself back together only to find himself too broken. He bit down on his finger in a meager attempt to quiet himself. He bit down so hard, and Alfred felt those teeth sinking into his heart. He pushed the curtain aside and took a step forward and knelt beside the bed. He didn't touch Arthur with his tingling fingertips the way he'd done when he'd carried Arthur to bed and resisted the sudden, overwhelming urge to kiss him. Instead, he rested his chin on his hands and spoke in a gentle tone.

"I won't say I understand, because I don't really know what you're going through," he began, "but I do know what it's like to feel like a failure, if that helps. I'm feeling it, too. You know, that hopeless, sinking feeling. But I cried all my tears before you got here."

Arthur's entire body was heaving with his sobs.

"Actually, I'm really nervous about going home. I don't think I'm ready to go back to the gym. I've never failed this hard before, and I feel like Braginsky is gonna follow me everywhere. Maybe that's kind of similar to what you're feeling. Like, the feeling of being trapped, you know?"

Alfred could see that Arthur was exhausting himself. He was using every last ounce of energy he had to cry like this. It was unlike anything Alfred had ever seen. The emotions Arthur had been trying to hide from the moment he'd entered the hospital were suddenly rushing out in waves and beautiful, terrible colors.

"Sorry. I wish I could help more."

"I don't know what to do," he finally whimpered.

"Me, neither."

Alfred was quiet then, and he sat beside Arthur as he cried. That was all he could do for him. He wasn't sure how long it went on for. He sat and he watched, he listened, he tried to feel everything that Arthur was feeling. But how could he possibly have done that? Get into the mind and emotions of someone so different than him, who had lived with experiences so different from his?

After lifetimes and thousands of flowing rivers, Arthur had dried out. His breath wasn't steady, but his sobs had stopped. His eyes were red and bloodshot and his lips were quivering.

"So you're off in the morning," he said. His voice was a little bit

shaky, but he was trying to pick himself up. Alfred could see it.

“Yeah. Doc says I’m right as rain.”

“With my luck, I’ll be here until I’m dead.”

“Aw, don’t say something like that.”

“Sorry, morbidity is in my blood.”

“To be honest, I’m kind of scared to go back.”

“Scared? Why?”

“Because.” Alfred drew patterns with his fingers on the sheets of Arthur’s bed. This was perhaps the closest they’d been. “I don’t want to deal with Braginsky.”

“You don’t have to. At least, not yet. Just train until you’re ready.”

“I’m going back a failure.”

“Don’t give me that, you twat,” Arthur sighed. “You’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

“Sorry, you’re right,” Alfred laughed. “I don’t know, I just feel like I need to get away for a little bit. Get my shit back together.”

“You’re telling me.”

A light went off in Alfred’s head when Arthur said that, a dry and not at all happy smile on his lips.

“Let’s do it, then.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s do it. Let’s get away. Get our shit back together.”

“What’re you on about?”

“I wanna get away. You wanna get away. So let’s go. Right now.”

Arthur sat up and glared, straight into Alfred’s wide and glimmering eyes. Now that he’d said it, and now that the idea was in his head, he couldn’t think of or consider anything else.

“Go? And just where the hell would we go?”

“Anywhere.”

“Right now?”

“Yes! Right now! Would you rather stay in this hospital another night?”

“Well, no, but...” Arthur’s gaze began flickering around the room. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s so hard to understand? I’m asking if you wanna sneak out of the hospital with me.”

“Why would you even bother?” Arthur finally blurted. “You’re leaving in the morning. You don’t have to sneak out. They’ll let you out willingly and you can go wherever you want.”

“But then you’re still stuck here. That defeats the purpose.”

Alfred could hear Arthur catch his breath. Maybe afraid of the very sound of it. He shut his mouth tightly and, even though it had seemed as if he’d cried himself dry, tears appeared on the brims of his eyes.

“Why?” he murmured. “You don’t even know me. Why is it so important to take me with you?”

“Because you don’t want to be here. And I already told you. We’re friends now,” Alfred said softly. “So I have to help when I can. We may not have known each other long, but...it doesn’t really feel like that, does it? At least, not for me.”

The truth was, Alfred’s motivations for bringing Arthur with him were completely and utterly selfish.

“I don’t understand you at all,” Arthur whispered. “You could so easily leave and get on with your life. But you’re hung up on this, aren’t you?”

“It’s just what heroes do,” Alfred winked. Arthur stared at him for a few moments before letting out a burst of laughter.

“Heroes? Really?” he cried. “You really are raving mad.”

“Birds of a feather flock together.”

“Yet again, I can’t argue with your logic.”

“So, are you gonna come with me?” Alfred stood up and put his hands in his pockets.

“I can’t very well refuse such a genuine, strong hero, can I?”

“No, you can’t.”

Alfred smiled and Arthur smiled back.

Arthur changed quickly into a set of clothes that he had with him, probably something Kiku had brought him during one of his visits.

“Poor Kiku,” he mused from behind the curtain. “He’ll probably lose his mind. I’ll have to call and leave him quite an apologetic message.”

“I’m not even gonna bother with Coach. I’ll wait until I get back to get chewed out.”

“Perhaps for the best.”

By the time he’d finished getting dressed, Alfred had come up with a plan. He realized that he’d never seen Arthur wearing anything but the hospital gown. Even dressed this casually, he looked straight out of a magazine. A loose pair of jeans ripped at the knees, a white and pink striped t-shirt, rings on his fingers and necklaces hanging in clusters and tangles around his neck.

“Guess you really like accessories,” Alfred laughed.

“Excuse me. I have to look my best all the time, even sneaking out of a hospital,” Arthur replied haughtily. “Unlike *someone*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? We can’t all be fashionable models, you know.”

Alfred threw another wink. Then he laid out the plan for escaping the hospital (the window was out of the question, considering they were on the sixth floor). It was a fairly simple plan. They would put on hospital gowns over their clothes and walk outside and Arthur would lean against Alfred and, if the nurses asked, Alfred would say that he was helping Arthur get to the restroom. The truth was that Arthur had managed to regain the majority of his strength,

but he agreed to play up his illness for the time being. Arthur would go into the bathroom and Alfred would stand outside and, once there were no nurses or doctors around, he would knock on the door and they would make a beeline for the elevator. After that, they could take off their hospital gowns and walk out and nobody would notice them.

“Where are we even going to go?”

“We can grab a taxi to my apartment,” Alfred replied. “We’ll grab some clothes and food—I don’t wanna spend a lot of time there. We can just play it by ear after that.”

“Well, if I’m crazy, at least you’re crazy, too.”

“That’s the spirit. Ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Then, Alfred and Arthur managed to sneak out of the hospital at night—neither discharged, both delirious and exhausted and ready to finally escape this cage. And for some reason, one that neither could really come close to understanding, they were together.

As they were hurrying through the parking lot, snickering and sweating and their hearts beating quickly in time, Arthur tugged lightly on Alfred’s sleeve.

“What’s up?” He glanced down. There were tears streaming down Arthur’s cheeks again. But somehow, they looked different in the silver light of the moon outside that hospital room.

“Thank you, Alfred,” he said. “Thank you for not leaving me behind.”

*Sorry, Arthur. But it wasn’t for you.*

Alfred smiled and wished he had the bravery to reach forward and wipe the tears.

*This is totally, shamelessly for me.*



## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The taxi ride was only about fifteen minutes. Alfred and Arthur were both exhausted and quiet, huddled in the backseat, coming down from their adrenaline high. Alfred told the driver where to stop, handed him some cash, and then they both got out of the car.

“Here it is. Home sweet home,” Alfred said as he got his keys out.

Arthur followed behind him quietly, gazing around the dark New York streets. It must have been two or three in the morning. As Alfred walked up the stairs to his apartment, Arthur kept his eyes on his back. They weren’t wearing their hospital gowns anymore. In the dim light of the apartment building’s stairwells, he watched the muscles of Alfred’s back ripple. He thought of it, thick and broad and probably very warm, like a window. He tried to look through it and see inside of Alfred, read what was happening in his heart and see what he’d had for dinner in his stomach, but he couldn’t do it. The only result, while he resisted the temptation to reach out and press his palm against his back, was a warm feeling spreading from his stomach and up toward his nose.

They stopped on the third floor and Arthur was almost out of breath, while Alfred had barely broken a sweat. Even after the time he’d spent in the hospital. This building seemed like magic—it was so quiet, silent, in the middle of this bustling city. Alfred put his keys into the door and opened it and stepped into the darkness.

“Come on in,” he said. He turned on the lights. “Sorry, it’s a bit of a mess.”

Arthur stepped inside and closed the door behind him. And, just as Alfred had said, it was a mess. It was small and narrow, and the main room was just a couch, a television, a small table, and a kitchen filled with only the necessities.

“Didn’t get a chance to clean before I got the shit kicked out of me,” Alfred shrugged. He took off his thin jacket and tossed it onto the couch, then stepped out of his shoes. There were stray articles of clothing scattered everywhere, Starbucks coffee cups that may or may not have been finished, empty bowls of Easy Mac and bags of chips, a small punching bag in the corner. Across the room were two doors—what Arthur assumed were the bathroom and Alfred’s bedroom. Despite the messiness and the cramped nature of the place, Arthur felt welcome and comfortable. Any place was better than that hospital room, reminding him just with its existence of all his shortcomings.

“Here, make yourself comfortable. Wanna cup of coffee or Easy Mac or something? You can help yourself to what’s in the fridge.” Alfred stumbled as he moved the clothes that he’d tossed onto his couch to make room. Arthur crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, watching with a small, crooked grin.

“I figured as a professional athlete, rubbish like Easy Mac wasn’t an option,” he teased.

“Yeah, but I cheat here and there,” Alfred winked. He moved to the kitchen and began making himself some instant coffee. “Fuck, I’m exhausted.”

“Sleep. Coffee won’t help, contrary to popular belief,” Arthur said. Alfred paused and turned over his shoulder.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“Me? No. Can’t you tell I’m positively full of beans?”

“Full of what?”

“Never mind.”

“Maybe we should just crash for the night. But we’ll have to leave early because Coach and Mattie will definitely come looking for me here when the hospital lets them know I kinda discharged myself.”

“Good plan.” Arthur stepped further into the apartment and stretched his arms out. He could feel Alfred watching him. He liked that feeling. “Awfully sorry, but would you mind if I showered? I feel absolutely disgusting. The hospital has a certain stench to it.”

“Totally. Go right ahead. I’ll put some towels out. Do you need a spare change of clothes?”

“That would be really kind of you.”

“No problem. Good thing I just did laundry.”

Arthur looked around and found that hard to believe. Just before he slipped into the bathroom, he heard Alfred mumbling to himself.

“British people like tea, right? I can just stick some water in the microwave and—”

“If you give me tea that was heated in the bloody microwave, I’ll fucking kill you,” Arthur called. Alfred jumped, startled that Arthur had even heard, and gave a nervous smile. Then Arthur closed the door and began the arduous process of figuring out how the shower worked.

The water was hot and smooth rolling over his skin, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so refreshed and cleansed in a shower. At some point during the shower, Alfred had snuck in and placed a towel, boxers, sweatpants, and a Captain America t-shirt on the counter, because Arthur found them waiting for him when he emerged. He wished he had lotion—Alfred didn’t appear to have any. Wherever they were going (if they were going anywhere at all), Arthur would have to stop at a drugstore and buy some. His skin could only last so long without the moisturization.

The clothes were surprisingly comfortable, while perhaps not what Arthur would have chosen. They were a bit big on him. He had to tighten the elastic strap on the sweatpants as far as they would go to keep them from falling down, and the t-shirt felt stretched out and baggy on his torso. But he felt warm and cozy in them. There was a strange sensation in wearing Alfred’s clothes—even stranger in wearing his boxers. Especially because they were decorated with a bald eagle pattern.

*Patriotic bloke, aren’t you?*

Arthur walked out of the bathroom, wiping his damp hair with the towel draped around his shoulders.

“Thank you, though I feel a little out of place wearing boxers like this,” he called. But mid-sentence, he realized that Alfred wouldn’t respond. He was sprawled on the couch, head resting on his outstretched arm, legs curled, still completely dressed and glasses lopsided. On the table beside him were two mugs. One filled with fresh coffee, one filled with tea. Arthur froze where he stood, feeling

as if he had walked upon something that he really shouldn't have. Something that he wasn't meant to see. Alfred had probably lain down to rest for a moment, only to fall asleep. It seemed like a deep sleep. He was absolutely still. Not even his eyelids fluttered.

Arthur felt terrible, jolting flickers in his stomach. Then there was an odd, unfamiliar tugging at his heart—like someone had tied a rope around it and was pulling, tightening, dragging. It made his chest tingle and his body warm. He wasn't sure what kind of expression he was making. While he'd been in the shower, Alfred had turned on some music. It was Frank Ocean. Arthur liked Frank Ocean.

He moved toward the couch, though Alfred had taken it up completely. Arthur didn't mind. He knelt down beside it and reached out and grabbed his mug of tea. He moved quietly so as not to wake Alfred. Though, from the looks of it, nothing would have woken him up. There was a difference, sleeping in one's own home rather than sleeping in a hard hospital bed. (He tended to sleep well in neither.) He brought the tea up to his lips. Average. Hot. Comforting.

He tried to stand up and go sit in the armchair by the television, but when his gaze fell upon Alfred's face, so close to his own and so defenseless, so calm in slumber, he found himself immobilized. Something was keeping him rooted to this spot, on his knees beside the couch, hands wrapped around a mug decorated with South Park characters while Frank Ocean sang his ode to Forrest. The lights in this apartment weren't as bright as the lights in the hospital. Alfred looked a bit different. His breathing was smooth and quiet, like the breeze that Arthur so loved coming off from the Thames.

"Idiot," he murmured, "you just got those glasses. You'll break them like that."

He put his mug back onto the table and reached forward to take Alfred's glasses off. He grabbed the frames on either side and gingerly pulled them off. For some reason, he held his breath while he did it. His fingertips brushed Alfred's cheeks, were left hot. As if Alfred's skin were made of fire. Arthur let out his breath and folded the glasses and put them on the table.

He should've stood up and walked away at that point.

But he couldn't bring himself to do it.

The mug was no longer warm enough for his hands.

*Can you feel me looking at you like this in your dreams?*

Arthur cautiously, slowly, nervously but naturally, let the backs of his fingers run along Alfred's cheek. They moved up toward his temple, touched lightly the spot where he'd had surgery and there was a light scar. Then he remembered the hazy feeling of Alfred's fingers on his lips, and his thumb moved on its own, down to Alfred's slightly parted lips. He was afraid for a moment that Alfred would wake up, but not even that was enough to stop himself. There was something indescribable about his lips—was that what he'd been thinking when Alfred had touched his lips, too? They felt like lips that had spoken every word that there was to be spoken, laughed every laugh that there was to be laughed, smiled every smile that there was to be smiled. That sensation filled Arthur with such longing it suffocated him.

*What would he do, I wonder, if I kissed him right now?*

Arthur couldn't understand his own impulses. How long had he known Alfred now? About two weeks. Not at all enough time to want to kiss someone this badly, he reasoned. And yet here he was, being driven mad by the intensity of his desires. Perhaps there was something special in the air of a hospital, a means of bringing strangers who were injured and tattered together like old friends. Maybe it was the fact that when Alfred could have so easily left him to rot in that bed, he had grabbed his hand and said, come with me. When was the last time Arthur had had someone befriend him so genuinely? When was the last time he had met someone so interested in getting to know him? For no real reason other than the fact that he happened to be in the bed beside him? It could've been anyone else.

Without realizing it, Arthur had begun running his fingers through Alfred's hair. He pushed his bangs back from his forehead. Alfred gave a soft, momentary groan, and curled up more tightly. Arthur thought that this might be similar to the feeling that a mother felt when she put her child, the love of her life and pride of her heart, to sleep at night. Alfred seemed suddenly so young, so small, so vulnerable and in need of someone like Arthur to stroke his cheek and brush his hair while he slept. If Arthur had known any lullabies, he would've sung one.

*What am I doing?*

With the rhythm of his hand and Alfred's sleepy heartbeat, Arthur began feeling tired himself. His eyelids began to droop and he

rested his head on the couch. Still kneeling, hands still buried in Alfred's hair, he began to doze off. He could feel Alfred's breaths falling on the top of his head.

*What would you do if I kissed you right now?*

*I can't do that.*

*No.*

*I don't know you, right?*

*And you definitely don't know me.*

*But you're awfully beautiful when you're asleep, you know that?*

He forgot to drink his tea.

Alfred decided to wake Arthur up a little after seven, because he knew that Coach and Mattie wouldn't show up until around ten anyway. Probably crashing through his door and yelling German obscenities. Alfred decided that since Arthur forgot to drink the tea, and it had been left cold over night, he would reheat it in the microwave and just not tell him. There was no way he'd be able to notice.

He'd been awake for a few hours now, checking out random upstate New York spots on Google Maps and packing a small bag with clothes and snacks and his handwraps. He packed extra clothes for Arthur, too. When he'd woken up, Arthur had been fast asleep, face crushed against the couch and kneeling on the ground. His face had been so close. Alfred had smelled the fresh, still-wet scent of his hair. It was strange because it had smelled like his own shampoo. Alfred had smiled when he'd seen him. Though, without his glasses, he had hardly been able to see at all.

*What the hell are you doing here?*

Confused and groggy, he'd managed to get up and grab a blanket from his bedroom. He hadn't had the heart to move Arthur, though he was sure that position couldn't have been good for his neck. He just hadn't wanted to wake him. So he'd left him, blanket and all. But at about 7:15, when the sun was already up and he had managed to

scramble some eggs, he moved to where Arthur was kneeling and gently shook him awake.

“Hey. Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey,” he murmured.

“Wha...?” Arthur opened his eyes and scrunched up his nose.

“Do you want some breakfast?” Alfred smiled. “I made eggs.”

Arthur stood up and moved to the kitchen, but kept the blanket wrapped around his shoulders. Still wiping the remains of sleep from his eyes, he sat down at the table, where two plates of scrambled eggs were waiting. For Alfred was another cup of coffee, and for Arthur the mug of tea.

“What, no bacon?” Arthur grumbled.

“Nah. Too many calories. Gotta stay lean.”

“Right.” Arthur put a forkful of eggs onto his tongue and chewed slowly. Then he raised his eyebrows, as if surprised. “Not bad.”

“It’s just scrambled eggs,” Alfred laughed. “It’s kinda hard to fuck it up.”

“You don’t know who you’re talking to, mate.”

Alfred should’ve been expecting this, but Arthur barely ate half the plate before he claimed that he was full. Then he grabbed his tea and he sipped it.

“Ugh! What the devil is this tea?”

“Oh, uh, don’t like it?”

“It tastes so stale,” he hissed. “Though it was fine last night...”

“Maybe brewed too long?”

“You fucking wanker.”

Alfred laughed and went to do the dishes. Quickly, before getting dressed.

“So,” Arthur began again. He’d stolen Alfred’s cup of coffee. Alfred didn’t mind. “What is the plan?”

“Well, I definitely need to get away from the city. Found a spot upstate that seems like a good regrouping place. Obviously, you’re welcome to come with me. You’ve already come this far.”

“How would we get there?”

“Uh, by car?”

“Do you...have a driver? Or are we talking taxi? Or—?”

“Nah! I have a car.” Alfred turned over his shoulder and winked. “She’s a real beauty.”

“Oh, you do?”

“Are you in? If you’ve changed your mind, I can always take you back to the hospital.”

*Please don’t ask me to do that.*

“I don’t want to trouble you,” Arthur sighed. “I’ve already made myself a burden, sleeping in your house and eating your food.”

“It’s no trouble, really!” Alfred insisted. “I like having you around.”

Arthur looked up at him from beneath his blanket, sitting at his kitchen table, drowsy and gorgeous. Alfred loved seeing Arthur in those clothes. Only someone like Arthur could make a slouchy outfit like that appear like a runway piece.

“Y...You do?”

“Yeah. I’ve gotten used to talking to you and seeing you.”

“Oh.”

“I packed enough clothes for about a week for the two of us.” Alfred sat back down at the table and leaned forward. He wanted to make sure that Arthur was looking into his eyes. “It’d be really cool if you came.”

Arthur tightened the blanket and grinned.

“Okay. Okay, if you say so. It would be nice to escape for a bit. Go somewhere nobody can find me.”



“Exactly. We’ll just get in the car and drive.”

“That sounds lovely.” Arthur took a sip of the coffee. “Thank you, Alfred.”

“You know, you’re like the only person who calls me that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Matthew and Coach and everyone at the gym calls me Al. My mom calls me Alfie—so does Lizzie. Only people I don’t know that well call me Alfred.”

Arthur didn’t say anything. He just blinked.

“I mean, if you like calling me Alfred, go ahead,” he smiled, “but you can call me Al, if you want. You can even call me Alfie. Just...don’t be so formal. It’s weird. All right?”

“All right, Al,” Arthur replied. Beneath the cheap, artificial lighting of this messy, cramped, cheap apartment, Alfred saw Arthur smile. It set him on fire, even now. “Thanks again.”

“Of course. Any time.”

*I should stop being this selfish, shouldn’t I?*

## Chapter End Notes

in other news Frank Ocean dropped his new album and I feel alive again

xoxo

At about 9:30, Alfred realized that they were running late, and Coach could break down his door at any moment. He'd completely lost track of time, showering and listening to music and engaging in idle, amusing conversation with his sharp-tongued, dry-humored guest. For his part, Arthur had passed the morning wrapped in the blanket, curled up on the couch with a (fresh) cup of Earl Grey—he had a few bags in his Gucci—and flipping absentmindedly through the television channels. He'd settled on Anderson Cooper. After breakfast he'd changed back into his jeans and disappeared into the bathroom, only to emerge with his hair perfectly messy and his skin shimmering and his lips glossed.

Alfred wasn't accustomed to guests other than Matthew spending this long in his place. Having Arthur there left him languid, distracted, unrelentingly smiley. It was strange, actually having someone respond when he spoke his random, incoherent thoughts out loud.

"Man, I should wash the dishes more often."

"Yeah."

"Or use Saran wrap to cover them while I eat."

"No."

"Oh, hey, *Rugrats* is on! Throwback."

"I'm changing the channel."

"Dude, c'mere, my hair smells like a baby's butt."

"That is most definitely not the idiom you're looking for, mate."

It wasn't that unusual for Alfred to have people spending the night, waking up flushed and exhausted and naked beside him in bed. But having someone so chastily and naturally sitting on his couch throughout the morning? That was strange. He was so used to the quick goodbyes, the "Sorry, gotta go, help yourself to what's in the fridge, that was fun, what's your name again? See ya." He couldn't remember the last time he'd made breakfast for anyone.

“Fuck, we’re late!” he cried when he checked his watch and it was 9:32. From the sofa, Arthur scoffed.

“Have an appointment?”

“No, but Coach is gonna show up and eat us alive.”

“Oh.”

“Are you ready to head out?”

“Let me put my shoes on. Want me to tidy up or—?”

“No, no time! It’s fine.”

Alfred was glad that he’d prepared a bag beforehand, so he was able to struggle into a pair of jeans and step into his Sperry’s and pull a t-shirt over his undershirt with relative quickness. Arthur was stuffing his things back into his bag, putting a pair of sunglasses on his head, tying the laces of his burgundy Docs.

“Where exactly are we going, again?” he asked as Alfred grabbed his keys and turned off all the lights.

“Not really sure, to be honest. Somewhere upstate.”

“Great.”

“Listen, spontaneity is good for the soul.”

“Whatever you say.”

Alfred turned over his shoulder and smiled at his guest, his unexpected visitor, the pleasant surprise that had brightened his apartment in the early morning. Arthur didn’t smile back—it seemed that his smile was a rare, dazzling occurrence that only happened when one earned it or was extremely lucky. Alfred didn’t mind so much. His brow wasn’t furrowed and his muscles weren’t tense, and he liked the way he was pouting and leaning his weight on one leg and putting his hand on his hip. In fact, a smile almost seemed out of place for him at that moment. Alfred smiled widely enough for the both of them.

These were the thoughts running through his head when he put his hand on the door and, at that very moment, was interrupted by three loud, quick raps on the door.

“Alfred! I know you’re in there! Open the damn door!”

“*Fuck*,” he whispered, cringing away from the door. Arthur jumped back, startled, and blinked at Alfred. “Shit, shit, shit.”

He kept his voice low, so that Coach and Matthew wouldn’t hear that he was, in fact, inside. Tiptoeing, he moved away from the door. He headed for his bedroom, and gestured for Arthur to follow him. Nervous and a bit shaken, Arthur gingerly followed. As they stepped, the aggressive knocking continued. Suddenly, the voice on the other side began speaking in quick, angry German.

*“Öffnen Sie die verdammte Tür, Hurensohn!”*

Alfred didn’t speak a lot of German, but he’d learned a bit of it from Coach—enough that he understood what Coach was saying and felt a pang of fear. But with that fear came a rush of adrenaline and energy and excitement. Without bothering to ask, he grabbed Arthur’s sleeve and pulled him into the bedroom and closed the door. The German screaming became muffled. Then Alfred went to the window in the corner and, with a grunt, lifted it all the way up. He could feel Arthur’s wide eyes watching him as he stepped out, straddling the windowsill for a second, before setting both feet on the fire escape.

“What the hell are you doing?” Arthur cried.

“Shh! Come on, we can go out this way.”

“The fire escape? Seriously?”

“Yes! Seriously! Come on!”

Alfred bent his head into the window and reached his hand out. Arthur stared at it in silence, his teeth now clenched and wrinkles creasing his forehead and incredulity shimmering in his eyes. He seemed more frightened than Alfred would have expected, especially after their escape from the hospital. Surely this was easier than that, Alfred thought. Surely. He wiggled his fingers.

“I don’t fancy this idea,” Arthur said. He didn’t move.

“Arthur, come on! Knowing Coach, he’ll probably kick through the fucking door.”

“But—”

“If you stay, they’ll take you back to the hospital,” Alfred said. He lowered his voice and forced gentleness into it. He didn’t know Arthur terribly well, but he figured that was probably the best way to get him to listen. “You don’t have to come. It’s okay if you’ve changed your mind.”

The knocking on the door continued. Alfred felt like he was in an action movie. It made his heart thump. This was exciting. Arthur looked back at the door and bit down on his lower lip. Alfred had seen him do that in the hospital every day before his group therapy sessions. It meant he was nervous and indecisive and probably wanted a cigarette.

“But I think it’d be good for you if you came,” Alfred continued. But, as hard as he tried to hide his selfishness, it came through. He’d always had a penchant for wearing his heart on his sleeve. “And I’d really like it if you did.”

Arthur blinked at him quietly, slowly. Speckles of sunlight were falling on his anxiety-ridden features.

*Fuck, you’re beautiful.*

“I don’t know...”

“Do you really want to go back to the hospital?” Alfred took a step out onto the fire escape and reached his hand out again. He smiled, flashing his teeth. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you. They don’t call me the Hero for nothing.”

Maybe the tone of his voice, or his smile, or the shape of his hand reaching out helped turn the switch in Arthur’s mind, because he finally relented. He cautiously stepped forward and let his hand fall into Alfred’s. It fit like a puzzle piece. Alfred squeezed his fingers—they were small, delicate, smooth like porcelain—and tugged gently. He acted as Arthur’s support while he followed suit and climbed through the window, a little bit less gracefully than Alfred had. Then he stood on the fire escape, still grasping Alfred’s hand, while Alfred gathered all the strength he could in his other hand to close the window. Then, he began the trek down the stairs of the fire escape, while he held back his laughter and tried to calm his heart, racing and singing from the feeling of holding Arthur’s hand in his.

They didn’t have time to go slow. Alfred scurried down the stairs, pulling Arthur behind him, until they found themselves on the solid concrete ground. Alfred convinced himself that he could hear

Coach finally managing to break through the door and enter his apartment, only to find it empty. It made him laugh. He thought that Arthur might be trying to say something, but he wanted to quickly get to the car first and start driving. Leave all of it behind and call Coach later, when he came back, and apologize with his puppy dog eyes and happy-go-lucky smile.

He was still holding Arthur's hand. Not even a bolt of lightning crashing between them could have persuaded him to let go. He led him about a minute down the road, where there was a small parking garage reserved for the residents of the apartments in the neighborhood. They were all relatively small, well-maintained cars, of different colors and models. Alfred hadn't driven his car in a while and felt pride and overwhelming contentment when he approached it. It stood out—bright red and shimmering. Though his apartment tended to be a bit of a mess, he always kept his car looking like new, even if he didn't drive it much. He finally forced himself to let go of Arthur's hand, so that he could unlock the car. Manually.

"*This* is your car?" Arthur gasped. Alfred looked over at him, gushing with the pride that filled his chest, and nodded.

"You like it?"

"It's...well, it's...certainly unique."

"My pride and joy."

Alfred had had the car passed down to him and when he'd been gifted it on his eighteenth birthday, he'd decided to make it the best car on the streets. It was a classic, bright red, 1955 Ford Thunderbird. Manual transmission, convertible, fender skirts, wheel hub caps, and beautiful white Tonneau cover. It looked straight out of a movie, exactly what Alfred had worked to make it look like. He raised his eyebrows at Arthur.

"Convertible and everything," he said.

Arthur sighed and shrugged his shoulders. Alfred frowned. He couldn't tell if Arthur really didn't care, or if he was just feigning disinterest. Something he did sometimes.

"If it'll get me out of here, I love it," he said.

"That it can do. Hop in."

Alfred got into the car and unlocked the door to the passenger seat. He started up the ignition as Arthur slipped in and closed the door. His image fit in well with the car's aesthetic, Alfred thought. It made him pause, before remembering that they were in a bit of a rush.

"Oh, a stick shift, too," Arthur said.

"You betcha. Ready to go?"

"Wait, I can't find the seatbelt."

"Oh, right, there aren't any."

"What?"

"They didn't come with the car, and I've never installed them."

"I'm fairly certain that's illegal?"

"It is."

"Well. All right then."

"Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Off we go!"

Alfred backed the car out of the garage, got onto the road, put his hand on the stick, and started driving away. When he glanced in the rearview mirror, he could see Coach and Matthew stepping out of his apartment building. He laughed out loud and rolled down his window a bit. They were on the road now, and there was no going back. He loved the feeling of driving this car, feeling the wind in his hair, not really knowing where he was going, with someone like Arthur sitting beside him.

"It drives pretty smoothly," Arthur pointed out. They were in the streets of New York now. Alfred maneuvered them with ease, which was not to say that he was a good driver. Within the bustle of the city, he was an asshole. In the first five minutes, he'd earned himself a few musical honks and generous middle fingers.

"Oh, make no mistake. That's my driving skill," he replied with a wink. "Though, I will admit, she's a dream."

“You must spend a lot of time with it.”

“I do. It’s important to me. I know it’s hard to believe with the way my apartment looks.”

“No, I believe it.”

Just before the entrance to I-87 north, Alfred pulled into a gas station. He asked Arthur if he needed anything. Without a word, while Alfred paid at the gas pump with his plastic, Arthur disappeared into the gas station. By the time he came back, Alfred had finished and been waiting in the car for five minutes. He returned armed with a plastic bag of snacks, two cups of coffee, and an extra packet of cigarettes.

“I wasn’t sure what kind of coffee you like, so I just got you black,” he said, handing the cup to Alfred.

“Dude, thanks. Black is fine.”

“I like lattes myself.”

Alfred smiled as Arthur cracked open a bag of Haribo gummy bears and they drove out of the gas station. Alfred popped a few into his mouth as he got onto the highway, smiling like a child. This felt surreal to him. The sun and the wind floating in through the cracked window, coffee in his hand, looking over and seeing Arthur, sunglasses on, sipping his drink beside him. Like a fucking masterpiece.

“What say you to pulling the top down, good sir?” he asked, faking his best British accent.

“Methinks tis a grand idea.”

They lowered the top of the car, leaving themselves open and vulnerable to the beautiful summer air. Alfred asked Arthur to reach into the glove compartment and get him his sunglasses.

“Al, you can’t see without your glasses, remember?” Arthur pointed out. “I doubt you’ve had enough time to get prescription sunglasses, too.”

“Fuck, you’re right. Sun in my eyes it is.”

“You’ll survive. Just don’t crash the car.”



“At least turn on the radio.”

After tinkering for a few minutes, Arthur settled on a rock station—all kinds of rock. The song playing was “Paint It Black.” Arthur nodded his head and tapped his finger against the dashboard to the beat. His lips mouthed the words.

“You like rock?” Alfred asked.

“Of course. You?”

“Sure. I like all types of music.”

“Favorite type?”

“Oh. Uh, rap and country.”

“Those are almost complete opposites.”

“Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes,” Alfred replied. Arthur stared at him, and Alfred could see the confusion in his eyes even through the sunglasses.

“What?”

“Walt Whitman.”

“Oh.”

Arthur gave a small smile, and went back to tapping and bobbing and drinking coffee. They were silent, listening to the music for a few minutes. The song changed to “Hotel California.”

“Hey, let’s play a game,” Alfred said.

“What kind of game?”

“I don’t know, a stupid game. Like, never have I ever, or truth or dare.”

“You really are very young at heart.”

“I’m young all over, man. Come on, play with me? Who knows how long we’ll be in the car! Could be years!”

“Right. Fine, I’ll play. You go first. Truth or dare?”

“Let’s start easy. Truth.”

“Easy? You underestimate me, love,” Arthur grinned. Alfred loved it when he called him that. “Here’s a question. When did you lose your virginity?”

“Oh.” Alfred laughed and glanced over at Arthur. He was leisurely sipping his coffee, and his hair was whipping around his face from the wind. They were in the far left lane, zooming past the other cars. Thankfully they’d missed rush hour. The highway was relatively quiet.

“You picked truth. Answer it.”

“I was fourteen.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Summer before my freshman year. We’d been friends for a while and decided that neither of us wanted to go into high school as virgins, so we had sex.”

“Are you still friends?”

“No. We were still friends in high school, but to be honest, sex made things kinda awkward,” Alfred grinned. “But, hey, at least I wasn’t nervous about it in high school.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“All right, your turn. Truth or dare?”

“Truth. I’m no fool.”

“Um...” Alfred thought for a moment, popped another gummy in his mouth. Admired the messiness and craziness of Arthur’s billowing hair. “How many tattoos do you have?”

“Tattoos? Let’s see...I have five.”

“Sweet. What are they of?”

“You’ve seen the design on my collarbone. It doesn’t mean anything, but looks bloody fresh. Then I have the ring on my bicep, also just for a cool design. A teabag on my ankle because I was young and thought it would be cute, and a rose in the center of my back from times that I was feeling particularly patriotic. Oh, and a quote on

my thigh from Oscar Wilde: ‘Everything popular is wrong.’”

“That’s kind of pessimistic.”

“I’m British. Of course it is.” Arthur took out a cigarette and lit it.  
“Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” Alfred said brightly. “I ain’t no sissy.”

“Whatever you say. Give me a moment to think.”

Arthur stared up at the sky and continued tapping the dashboard. Racking his brain for the perfect dare. Taking a deep drag of his cigarette.

“It’s a bit difficult when we’re trapped in the car,” he sighed. The smoke rose up into the bright blue sky.

“I’m sure you’re creative enough.”

The song playing in the car was “Anarchy in the U.K.” Arthur was singing along to that, too. Suddenly, an epiphany worked its way across his features, and he smirked over at Alfred.

“All right, I’ve got it. You have to go to the center lane of the highway and at the top of your lungs, scream ‘God save the queen.’”

“That’s it? Easy as pie,” Alfred winked. When the road was clear, he put his blinker on and moved to the center lane of the highway. Then he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and yelled as loud as he could (which was quite loud).

“GOD SAVE THE QUEEEEEEEEEEN!”

As they watched the faces in the cars, windows down, turn and stare, Arthur burst into laughter. Alfred loved that sound, that face, and he laughed, too.

“See? That was nothing.”

Arthur just laughed and smoked and ate more gummy bears.

“Okay, truth or dare?” Alfred asked.

“You know what, fuck it. Dare. Let’s see how creative *you* can be.”

“Ooh, I have to pick a really good one.”

“Be warned. We of the United Kingdom are known for maintaining composure in even the most grave of circumstances.” He tapped his cigarette out the window. “You’ll really have to come with something special if you’re going to shake me.”

“You underestimate me, old chap.”

Alfred, watching Arthur smile and laugh and eat gummy bears in the passenger seat of his car while Jimmy Paige played his legendary guitar solo, was overcome with an emotion he couldn’t describe. He had never felt such longing, such gratitude, such selfishness in his life. For a moment, he’d even forgotten about the reason he’d met Arthur in the first place. But that was the point, wasn’t it? He’d forgotten the face Arthur had been making when they’d first met, the sorry state he’d been in and the way he’d shuffled across the hospital floor and fallen and cried himself to sleep, quietly, when he didn’t think Alfred could hear him.

He gripped the steering wheel more tightly and was smiling so widely that his lips were trembling.

“All right. Fine. I have a sick dare, then. I dare you—no, actually, I triple dog dare you...”

“Oh, bollocks.”

“...I triple dog dare you to kiss me. Right here.”

Arthur didn’t reply. Alfred couldn’t bring himself to look over. When he’d thought of it, he hadn’t really meant to say it. But when he’d opened his mouth, the words had come out so naturally, so beautifully, so utterly selfishly. Had he always been this selfish, he wondered? Had he always worked with self-interest in mind like this?

Before he could even get his thoughts in order, he felt a slight tug on his arm. In surprise, he turned to look at Arthur. And when he turned, it was there. Arthur’s glossy, coffee and tobacco-stained lips, warm and pink and puckered, pressed to his. His fingers gently grasping at the sleeve of Alfred’s arm, eyes closed behind the blue-tinted sunglasses, leaning forward from his seat. Alfred couldn’t bring himself to close his eyes. He was scared that if he did, this feeling would go away. His lips felt different than Alfred had imagined them. They were even smoother, even plumper, and they tasted of a beautiful voice and defensive sarcasm. They tasted of hidden smiles

and musical laughs reserved for only the most laugh-worthy moments.

*I wonder what my lips taste like.*

When Arthur pulled away and fell back into his seat, he was blushing madly, and Alfred imagined that he was, too. Nerves must have compelled Arthur to take another drag of his cigarette, push another few gummy bears into his mouth, while Alfred held his breath and held in his smile. He didn't want to be too obvious, after all. That would have been just embarrassing. It sounded like Robert Plant was serenading them now.

*"As we wind on down the road, our shadows taller than our souls..."*

Alfred glanced out of the car and saw its shadow on the pavement of the highway.

"Your turn," Arthur said, his voice a bit quieter now. But still like an intense, deafening symphony in Alfred's ears. "Truth or dare?"

They drove for about four hours before shit hit the fan and Alfred's Thunderbird decided to rebel, perhaps at odds with the uncharacteristically long journey it had been commandeered to endure.

But they were four hours that Alfred—and, he hoped, Arthur—would never forget.

There was something special in doing nothing but drive. Since cars were invented, driving into infinity had become a symbol of freedom, independence, endless romance. He'd always imagined himself being able to get behind the wheel and drive wherever the road would take him, without a care in his mind or a burden on his shoulder. While there were still a few cares and still a few burdens, this was freedom unlike anything he'd ever felt. He'd joked around with his high school friends about taking a road trip across the country. Route 66 and all that jazz. But they'd never gotten around to it and since diving into his life of intense training and fighting, he hadn't gotten this sort of shot at freedom.

Arthur being there made it that much better. Rock music playing the whole way, summer sun shining down on them, while Arthur sang along and ate gummy bears and smoked cigarettes and told jokes that went right over Alfred's head.

"Knock knock," Alfred said.

"Who's there?"

"Boo."

"Boo who?"

"Hey, it's just a joke, don't cry!"

"That's absolutely terrible," Arthur scoffed. "Let me tell you a real joke. Why did the bald man paint rabbits on his head?"

"Um. Because he's expressive?"

"Because from a distance, they looked like hares."

Alfred didn't say anything. He tried to laugh, he really did, but even after he actually understood the joke he couldn't find any laughter within him. He just looked over at Arthur and pursed his lips. Then he shrugged.

"You just don't understand British humor, that's all," Arthur grumbled. Then he stole the gummy bear that was in Alfred's hand.

They talked about a lot of things. Being on the highway, while it was pretty quiet and they were zooming and the top was down and the Beatles were blasting, was oddly conducive to genuine, easy conversation. Alfred ran his mouth because, for one reason or another, Arthur listened. Alfred could tell, even if he wasn't looking directly into Arthur's eyes, even if Arthur wasn't directly engaging in the conversation, that he was listening. It was just something he could feel. And he felt it especially when he turned his head every few minutes to glance over at his companion. Feet on the dashboard, sunglasses glistening, hands tapping against his thighs to the beat of the music. At one point, he put his head over the window and looked over his shoulder, at the stretches of road they were leaving behind. The shape of his neck, the curve of his shoulder, the tangles in his hair and the pucker in his lips, were such breathtaking, small details that Alfred was astonished at his own ability to recognize them. He couldn't get the taste, the feel, of Arthur's kiss off his lips. But they hadn't talked about it. That was probably for the best.

It was the most energetic Alfred had seen Arthur since he'd climbed up onto his bed to cover up the smoke alarm, about two weeks ago, the first night they'd met. That seemed like so long ago, didn't it?

*I can't have only known him for this long, right?*

*How...how did we end up here, again?*

*Me, driving down the highway to nowhere. He, a picture-perfect image in the passenger's seat.*

*Normal people don't do this, right?*

Alfred was so unbearably happy that he was able to push the frightening vision of Ivan Braginsky's face to the dim, dark labyrinths in the very back of his mind.

His luck must have run out, though, when his car's engine began to sputter and stumble along the highway.

“Shit,” he grumbled.

“What? What’s going on?”

Instead of responding, Alfred managed to take the car from the left lane all the way to the right, out of the way of the other highway-goers, just before the car completely stopped working. It was making terribly sad sounds, and it made Alfred’s heart pound uncomfortably.

“Fuck, I just took it out!” he cried, banging his head against the steering wheel. Staying like that, he managed to press the button to get the top up and take a few deep breaths. They’d only been out for four hours and the car was already pissed.

“Perhaps we should check out the problem ourselves?” Arthur suggested. Alfred had almost forgotten that he was there, and his voice, hoarse with years of cigarette smoke, brought him back to the reality that he was not alone and that he needed to get his shit together.

“Yeah, good idea. You can stay in the car if you want.”

“All right.”

Alfred stepped out of the car and moved to the hood. They were already pretty up north from New York City, surrounded by lush green hills and blossoming trees and a world completely unlike the bustling city in which they’d been previously trapped. The air was fresher and there weren’t as many cars and everything seemed calmer. Everything except for his smoking engine.

He got back into the car with a huff and a puff and anxiety written on his face. He couldn’t hide it even a little bit.

“Well?” Arthur asked. He’d put his feet down and lifted his sunglasses.

“Well,” Alfred began, “the engine is pretty much useless. Can’t tell you why or how, but I guess I did something terrible in my past to warrant this, who fucking knows. Maybe this is karma for kidnapping you.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.”

“So, long story short, the car isn’t going to move from this spot without being towed.”



“All right. Call whomever you need, then. They can just tow the car to the nearest repair shop.”

“Yeah, well...” Alfred pulled out his cell phone and stared at it. Dismally. Hopelessly. “There’s no service here.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Can we walk to the—?”

“What, you mean fifteen miles?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Alfred leaned his head back and stared at the roof of the car. “I mean, it’s doable, but it would take at least two and a half hours.”

“I suppose.” Arthur stared out the window and pursed his lips. “Any ideas?”

“Well...”

Two minutes later, Alfred was standing on the side of the road with his thumb stretched out, and Arthur was sitting next to him on the grass with their small bags. It was the best thing Alfred had been able to come up with and, if he was being honest with himself, he’d always kind of wanted to hitchhike. He put on his best smile and let his hand sway up and down, outstretched so that anyone could see it. There was no hope for him to fix the car at this point—he knew the steps, but he had none of the repair materials he needed. With no service and a long way to walk on the highway, Alfred and Arthur had decided that this was the most efficient way of doing it, even if it meant subjecting themselves to potentially dangerous (though generous) strangers.

“We can switch when your arms get tired,” Arthur said. He was hugging his legs to his chest, chin on his knees, looking very bored and smoking a cigarette. It was a good look on him.

“Please. Like that would happen to a hero like me.”

“Bite me.”

“America’s full of nice people. Someone will definitely pick us

up.”

“Whatever you say.”

It was still light out, so it would be a while before they’d have to start walking just to get off the highway before nightfall.

Alfred wasn’t sure how long he was holding up his thumb, switching between one arm and the other, smiling and waving like he was some kind of celebrity. He got a few smiles back, a few waves, a few apologetic looks, but still nobody stopped. It was becoming mentally exhausting. Arthur seemed tired (they hadn’t gotten much sleep last night) and their conversations were short and sleepy. At the very least, the weather was nice and the scenery was beautiful.

Perhaps an hour or so later, a small, dark blue Peugeot 208 passed and, at the sight of the now tired Alfred and drowsy, curled-up Arthur, pulled over and came to a slow stop. Alfred’s energy returned to him and he let out a cry of excitement.

“Yes! See? I told you!”

“Wonderful. Now help me up before they change their mind.”

They grabbed their bags and walked to where the car had pulled over after Alfred made sure the Thunderbird was locked and they had everything they needed. Before actually getting into the car, he knocked on the passenger seat window, tinted so that the actual riders in the car weren’t visible. They rolled the window down, and Alfred leaned forward while Arthur waited a few meters away.

“Hi,” Alfred greeted with a smile. “Thanks so much for pulling over.”

“*Bien sûr, chéri*. You’re so cute I couldn’t help it.”

The man who’d spoken was in the driver’s seat, one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the stick. Alfred had never seen someone who moved so much like water, movements fluid and rhythmic. The man had shimmering blond hair tied back in a messy yet elegant ponytail, lips shining from pink gloss, warm blue eyes. He was wearing a purple collared shirt open at his chest and tucked into a tight pair of black trousers, a French flag pendant, and solid gold studs in his ears.

“What are you talking about? I’m the one who told you to stop,”

said the man sitting beside him. A darker but brighter man, with unkempt brown hair and olive skin and eyes that were almost as green as the summer grass. His smile was sunny and contagious. The blond man spoke with a heavy French accent, though his voice was smooth and musical, while the dark-haired man spoke with a different kind of accent—Spanish, maybe? The intertwining of their voices was really gorgeous, Alfred mused.

“Either way, we’re happy to help,” the Frenchman said with a wave of his wrist. “Right, Antonio?”

“*Claro*. The more the merrier.”

“Where you guys headed?”

“Lake Placid,” the Frenchman replied. His smile was very easy. “About an hour north. That’s as far as we can take you.”

“Great. Hey, Arthur! How does Lake Placid sound?”

“It sounds placid.”

“All right. Guess we’re headed to Lake Placid,” Alfred smiled. But when he turned back to the men in the car, the Frenchman’s eyes were wide and he looked as if he were both hiding a smile and resisting the temptation to scream.

“Arthur?” he repeated. He reached up and wiggled his fingers. “*Chéri*, who is your friend?”

“Hey, Arthur, come introduce yourself.”

Arthur squeezed his face in beside Alfred’s. But before he’d even managed to say a word, the color drained from his face and his jaw hung open and his words appeared to leave him. He was staring at the Frenchman’s face as if he’d seen a ghost and was utterly, completely terrified.

“F...*François*?!” he finally screamed. The Frenchman, in response, broke into an elated smile that reached from ear to ear and jumped slightly in his seat.

“Arthur! *Mon choupinou*! My, it’s a small world, isn’t it?”

“Much too small, if you ask me! Why did it have to be *you* of all people?” Arthur cried. He was so angry, getting so worked up, that

Alfred could see the tension in his temples and his jaw.

“Do you two know each other, then?” Alfred asked cautiously. Arthur’s temper had flared up and he didn’t want to step on any landmines.

“Yes, we do,” François winked. “Arthur and I were once the most passionate lovers.”

“Shut up, you bastard!”

Antonio seemed just as surprised and confused and entertained as Alfred.

“Oh, but Arthur, didn’t we have the most exciting days together?” François gushed. He was puckering his lips and blinking his long eyelashes and speaking in a dreamy voice. “Don’t hurt me in such a way, *mon amour!*”

“No. I hate you. Al, we’re not going with them. We’re going to wait for the next idiots who blunder by.”

“But—”

“I’m not riding with this frog, not even if I have to spend the night sleeping on the side of the road.”

“Arthur! Come on. Even if you guys *did* have a thing, can’t you just bury the hatchet? Move on?”

“Don’t worry, you adorable child,” François interrupted. He was addressing Alfred now. “We buried the hatchet long ago. Isn’t that right, Antonio?”

“I should hope so,” Antonio laughed. He leaned across the seat and lightly kissed François’s lips.

“See! Nothing to worry about. Lake Placid sounds good, anyway.”

Arthur crossed his arms and looked away, now blushing madly and pouting like a toddler throwing a tantrum. Alfred had instantly grown to like this beautiful, easy-going couple, driving in their cute little car and picking up these desperate hitchhikers. He liked the way their voices sounded together and the way they spoke and the generous, kind sparkle they both had in their eyes. One pair blue, the

other green, like two matching pieces in a jewelry set. He wanted to ride with them. And he wanted to get off the highway and get his car towed soon.

“Come on, please? Please? Please?” With each word, Alfred inched closer to Arthur’s face, clasping his hands together and making his puppy dog-face. The one that very few had been known to resist.

“No.”

“Oh, Arthur, at least do it for this precious boy,” François cooed.

“You shut up.”

“It’s only an hour,” Antonio pointed out. “It really would be very quick. You could even take a siesta if you wanted!”

“No.”

“Pleeeeeaaaaseeeee?” Alfred pleaded. Arthur had been avoiding his eyes, but when he glanced over at Alfred’s pathetic, tear-jerking expression, he let out a breath and rolled his eyes and uncrossed his arms.

“*Fine!* But it’s only because I owe you,” he grumbled.

“Yes!”

“*¡Estupendo!* Climb in.”

They threw their bags in the trunk and sat in the back of the car, Arthur behind François and Alfred behind Antonio.

“I’m Alfred. Alfred F. Jones,” he smiled. He could meet François’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Nice to meet you. This is seriously so nice of you guys.”

“My, you’re a pretty one,” François chuckled. Alfred felt his cheeks becoming warm as the Frenchman turned around in the driver’s seat and brought his face closer. Eyes locked onto Alfred’s, he took his hand and kissed it, letting his lips linger. “*Enchanté, chéri.*”

“Likewise.”

“*Pas de problème,* Alfred,” François continued. Then François put the car in drive and they continued down the highway. “My name is François Bonnefoy. Please call me François. And this is my partner,

Antonio Carriedo.”

“Are you guys taking a trip to Lake Placid?”

“No, we own an inn there,” Antonio said.

“Oh. Cool.” He shifted in his seat and glanced over at Arthur. He looked very different sitting in the backseat of this car than he had sitting in the passenger seat of the Thunderbird. “So, you and Arthur really...?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” François laughed. “We met when I lived in London for a little bit. It wasn’t terribly long, but we did have our fling, as they say.”

“I’ve tried to block it out of my memory, but somehow you keep showing up in my life,” Arthur sighed.

“He’s a bit dramatic, isn’t he?” François winked in the mirror. “We’ve actually been good friends since then.”

“You have a twisted definition of friendship, frog.”

“You always did love that pet name.”

“Fuck off.”

“A small world it is,” Alfred laughed.

“How do you two know each other?” François asked. Alfred and Arthur anxiously looked at each other.

“He was here for a shoot and we met at a bar,” Alfred lied. As much as he wore his heart on his sleeve, he was also a frighteningly good liar. “Decided we both needed to get away, and here we are.”

“Interesting. Arthur isn’t one to open up easily. Are you, Arthur?”

“Maybe you just think that because I hate you.”

“That’s not what you said when we were in bed together.”

“Piss off, you cheese-eating surrender monkey.”

“Ow, *mon coeur*.”

Antonio and Alfred laughed, and Alfred felt comfortable. Moments like this were what he'd been looking for on his journey to escape. He loved Coach, and loved being around him, but Coach reminded him too much of his past, his present, his failures. Meeting strangers, laughing with them, was a different experience that he so desperately needed. This was exactly what he so desperately needed.

The four of them were silent for a few minutes, listening to grainy classical music rise up from the stereo.

"What do you do, Alfie?" François finally asked. Alfred was taken aback at first by the use of this nickname, but he liked the way it sounded on François's French tongue. Antonio leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes with a gentle smile, while Arthur leaned against the window, persistent in his grumpy comportment.

"Actually, I'm a UFC fighter," Alfred said. "You know MMA?"

"Sure. Afraid I don't watch it. But that's exciting. You must be very strong and powerful."

"Well, I mean..."

"You must have talent to go along with those chiseled features. No need to feel modest, darling. I don't know anything about it, so you could tell me that you're the best in the world and I would be none the wiser. "

Alfred could see François's smile by the sparkle in his eyes in the mirror. But still, the words struck something sensitive in his heart. He grinned, fell silent, stared out at the trees zooming past.

For the next hour they made idle conversation. Antonio slept, though Alfred noticed that his hand gripped François's even in his slumber. It was clear then that Arthur and François really had buried the hatchet a long time ago.

Arthur stayed quiet and seething, and the sight was enough to make Alfred's lips tingle. He wanted to kiss those pouty lips again, that cheek crushed against the window, the pale neck that had looked so perfect stretched out of his car.

About an hour later, they exited the highway and entered the colorful, mountainous village of Lake Placid.

Arthur felt so frustrated, so astonished, so angry but at the same time content, that he couldn't bring himself to say much at all for the rest of the day. He rode the car in silence until they reached Lake Placid, even as Alfred gushed about how much he'd wanted to come here and François and Antonio droned on and on about how lovely it was to live there. He was silent, though he put on a deliberately disdainful expression, when he and Alfred got out of the car and François was finally able to give him the standard greeting—two kisses on the cheek.

"It really is lovely to see you again, Arthur. I hope things are going well," he said, his voice more gentle. And he smiled in the face of Arthur's silence. He had always been able to smile like that.

Though Arthur had been so determined to not spend any more time than he had to with François and Antonio (but, to be honest, he quite liked the Spanish bloke), he found them too welcoming and generous to turn away. Doing so would've actually made him feel guilty. They drove him and Alfred first to a repair shop, where Alfred hopped out of the car, ran inside, and then came back saying that it would be taken care of by tomorrow. Then they drove them back to their inn, small and on the shore of the lake, and welcomed them inside. When Arthur looked around, he saw mountains rising up and their reflections in the blue of the lake, saw houses nestled together, saw smiling people walking the streets in shorts and tank-tops and cheap sunglasses. He couldn't say that he minded much that Alfred's car had broken down. It was just another, unpredictable part of their adventure. He was alive, he was breathing clean air, he was away from anything and everything that might have caused him more stress, and that was all he cared about. That, and being able to smoke his cigarettes.

He felt at ease with Alfred. As loud and obnoxious and unreasonably energetic as he was, he made Arthur comfortable. Made him feel like maybe he didn't need to be so damn irritable all the time.

And he kept doing unexpected things. Like, when he told a joke, he would put his hand on Arthur's shoulder and laugh so smoothly, totally unaware of the paralyzing effect of his touch. And sometimes,



in the car ride, he would lean over and whisper something in Arthur's ear so that François and the napping Antonio couldn't hear.

"Sorry about the car, I know it's frustrating," he would say. "I like your French buddy," he would say. "You look kind of tired, are you okay?" he would say. His quiet, raspy whispers like cymbals crashing in Arthur's ears.

And then, when they got out of the car at the inn and grabbed their bags from the trunk, and they followed Antonio and François inside, Alfred reached over and grabbed Arthur's hand. Maybe because he was moving slowly and lethargically, maybe because he was looking around and appeared a bit lost, maybe because it seemed like Arthur needed someone to hold his hand. He grabbed it and he squeezed and he smiled and they walked in together like two young children, promising to stay physically connected on the playground so they don't get separated from one another.

*That's not fair, Al. That's not fair, and you know it.*

*It's only been a few weeks, right?*

As François moved behind the check-in counter, shooing away the young man who'd been working, Antonio slipped in behind him and snaked his arm around his waist. François hardly had the chance to blink before Antonio leaned down and kissed his neck, squeezing him.

"Mm, Antonio, please. We have guests," François laughed, leaning into his kiss and closing his eyes. Even as he feigned protest, he let Antonio squeeze him for a few more moments. Arthur watched them and admitted to himself that they were a much more beautiful, natural couple than he and François had been. They'd clashed way too much, even if the sex had been fucking glorious.

When he had finished his teasing, Antonio winked, and disappeared into the back room.

"A pleasure to meet you both," he called. "Enjoy your stay."

Alfred leaned forward against the counter, though he kept his hand wrapped around Arthur's. His palm was sweaty and he couldn't stop moving his fingers, like he was anxious about something, but Arthur didn't mind. It gave him something to focus on, something that engulfed his entire mind.

*Why are you holding my hand anyway, Al?*

François scrolled through the computer for a few moments in silence.

“It’s a busy time. I’ve got only one room that’s suitable,” he said.

“That’s fine,” they replied in unison.

“I’ll even give you a discount, since Arthur and I have quite a bit of history.”

“I don’t want your charity,” Arthur heard himself say.

“I do!” Alfred cried.

“Wonderful. *Bien*, here are the keys. We also have a pool, though I’m not entirely sure why people prefer it to the lake, a sauna, and a small gym. It’s not much, but I do hope you enjoy your stay. You can just pay day by day.”

“You’re, like, seriously the best,” Alfred exclaimed. He was positively beaming. “Gotta punching bag?”

“An old one. It should serve your purposes well, though.”

“Awesome. Can’t let myself get too comfortable,” he winked. Even though it wasn’t directed at Arthur, it made his chest feel unbearably hot. He wondered if Alfred could feel Arthur squeezing his hand.

On the way upstairs, they decided they were done adventuring for the day and were ready for a quiet evening. When they’d settled, Arthur popped into the shower and Alfred ran to the corner store for some dinner. There was only one bed.

“You like pizza?”

“Who doesn’t like pizza? The greasier, the better.”

Strangely enough, while he was in the shower alone, Arthur felt the pervasiveness of Alfred’s absence. It was the first time that Arthur actively realized that he and Alfred had spent nearly every moment together for the past few weeks—waking up together, eating together, going to sleep together, talking together, breathing together, being broken together. They had been putting themselves back together again...together. Arthur had grown used to Alfred being the first

person he saw when he woke up and the last person he saw before he slept. There was something about just his presence that was comforting now to Arthur.

That frightened him.

It hadn't been very long, after all, had it?

*Pull yourself together, Arthur. This isn't like you.*

*Pull yourself together.*

Arthur put on a bathrobe and went out to the balcony and smoked until Alfred came back, armed with pizzas. They had a lovely view of the lake, a mirror for those vain mountains, so they decided to eat outside. Both tired and happy, neither said much. They were happier for each other's presence. Arthur's pride was starting to fade, just enough to admit to himself that he so longed to hold Alfred's hand again. After they'd stuffed themselves to the point of physical pain, all at Alfred's urging, Arthur made them tea and lit another cigarette.

"I'm exhausted," Alfred breathed. He arched his neck back over the seat and gazed up at the sky.

"We have had a long day," Arthur replied. "Perhaps we should call it a night."

"Sounds good to me. We'll wing it again tomorrow. Maybe go swimming!" He stood up and stretched his long, muscular limbs. Arthur watched those muscles ripple and forced himself to turn away.

"I'm going to stay out a bit longer," he said.

"Kay. G'night."

When he'd smoked enough to kill a small child and was sure Alfred was asleep, he went back inside. He could hardly keep his eyes open, but he forced it. He moved to the door, but with his hand on the handle, paused and let his eyes wander over his shoulder. Alfred was lying on his stomach, arms beneath the pillow, breaths steady. He remembered the feeling of his fingers brushing the innocent skin of Alfred's cheeks. He walked back to the bed because he couldn't help it. Not when Alfred looked like that.

He stroked Alfred's cheek and brushed his hair back. He watched

Alfred exhale softly, squeeze the pillow. Then Arthur leaned down and put his lips to Alfred's forehead. His skin tasted sweet and young. He wasn't worried at all about Alfred waking up. With his lips feeling numb and his heart swaying to the rhythm of Alfred's breaths, he left the room and went down to the lobby. There, in the public restroom, he wouldn't need to worry about disturbing Alfred.

When he was done in the bathroom, he walked back out to find François behind the counter, with a knowing glimmer in his ocean eyes. He leaned his elbows on the counter and gestured with his fingers. Arthur, though he was desperate for a cigarette to get the taste out of his mouth, walked over.

"You never change, Arthur," he said with a raise of his eyebrows. Arthur couldn't meet his eyes. "Then again, I don't know if people ever really change."

Arthur started tapping his feet against the counter and fidgeting with his fingers.

"Are you awfully tired?"

"No."

"Come—we'll go out and have a smoke."

They went out to the patio and sat down and pulled out their cigarettes. Arthur with his Benson & Hedges silvers, François with his Vogue slims. Arthur lit François's, and then leaned forward and lit his with the already lit slim.

"So tell me honestly, *chéri*," François began. His hair looked like golden silk in this light. "How are you?"

"Just bloody peachy, can't you tell?"

François chuckled his dry chuckle and looked out at the sunset.

"You're still as gorgeous as ever," he said.

"Thank you, compliments from you truly make all the difference."

"Oh, stop your pouting. It's such a dreadfully unpleasant expression."

"Sorry, almost forgot that I cater my pleasantness to your bloody

liking.”

François chuckled again. Then his face became more serious.

“You really should take care of yourself,” he said. “I’m sure the beautiful boy upstairs in your bed hates to see you like that.”

“Luckily, it doesn’t matter how he feels.”

“*C’est vrai*,” François shrugged, “but I’m not telling you to do it for him. Take care of yourself for you.”

“Why, thank you, I never thought of that.”

François’s smile was defeated. The same smile Arthur had seen countless times when they’d argued, so much that it had eventually driven them apart.

He changed the subject.

“Alfred’s quite charming. When did you get lucky enough to make his acquaintance?”

“We’ve only known each other a few weeks.”

“My, you’ve gotten close.”

“Not quite the way you’re thinking,” Arthur scoffed. He took a deep drag.

“Oh? A shame.” François raised an eyebrow and held his cigarette between his slender fingers. Arthur didn’t respond. He just sighed and turned away. “What even brought you two to a place like this? I have to say, I never imagined running into the likes of you.”

“A series of unfortunate events,” Arthur replied. Now he was thinking about Alfred and it was making him nervous. He didn’t like talking about Alfred with François. “I was here for a shoot and, one way or another, we found ourselves hitchhiking on the side of the highway.”

“What an adventure.”

“Quite.”

“He’s a bit younger than you, isn’t he?”

“Yes. And?”

“I suppose I’ll have to be blunt. Are you in love with him?”

“What’re you on about?” Arthur spat. The question caught him completely off guard, though in retrospect, he should have expected something like that from François. “In *love* with him? It’s only been a few fucking weeks!”

“What does that have to do with anything?” François tapped his cigarette against the ashtray. “It took me and Antonio a few years to actually realize we were in love, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we *weren’t* in love before that. Perhaps it was love at first sight and we didn’t know it.”

“Yeah, well, I am very different from you, frog.”

“Are you, though? I’m not so sure.” He leaned forward on his knees and pierced straight through Arthur’s soul with his gaze. He’d always been able to see right through him. It irritated him so much. “Love doesn’t always have to be something that builds over time, you know. It can happen in the blink of an eye, or over the course of an entire lifetime.”

“You stupid French and your romantic ideas,” Arthur grumbled. But his heart was so loud that he could hardly hear his own voice. Now the question was echoing in his head like a scream in a cave, bouncing off the walls, deafening.

“If it helps, I think it would be good for you to fall in love with him,” François said. “He would be good for you.”

“The guru has spoken.”

“*Écoute*. All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be afraid of falling in love, and you shouldn’t be afraid of admitting it. It’s all right to fall in love fast. It doesn’t mean it’s not real.”

“Who even asked you?”

“The sun? The moon? The stars? *Qui sait?*”

“Fucking hell.”

“Just don’t push the thoughts out, all right? Let your emotions flow.”

They finished their cigarettes and Arthur went back upstairs to his room. He changed into his pajamas and brushed his teeth and slid into bed, careful not to rock it too much. He didn't want to wake Alfred, who was in the exact same position in which Arthur had left him. But, being so close to him and hearing every detail of his breaths and sharing a bed, Arthur couldn't bear to look at him. He turned his back to Alfred's face and his fingers clutched the blankets. It took him much longer than he'd hoped to fall asleep. He kept asking himself the same question, over and over again, singing out in François's milky voice.

*Are you in love with him?*

*It's all right to fall in love fast.*

*It doesn't mean it's not real.*

*Are you, Arthur, in love with Alfred?*

When Alfred woke up, he could smell coffee. He sat up in bed and stretched his sore limbs and, in the face of the blurriness around him, groped for his glasses on the nightstand. When he'd managed to put them on, he saw Arthur at the coffee table, pouring two dark cups and wearing the same bathrobe he'd been wearing last night. The sunlight was forcing itself through the window and it was so hot that Alfred was sweating. He noticed the spot on the bed beside him was ruffled, and there was an indent in the spot where Arthur must have slept. Alfred liked seeing it there. He smiled.

"Good morning. You all right?" Arthur said. His voice sounded a bit raspy. He walked over and handed the coffee to Alfred.

"Yeah. Haven't slept that well in ages. What about you?"

"Feel right refreshed as well."

Alfred could tell just by Arthur's face that he was lying. His lips looked a bit chapped, there were dark bags underneath his eyes, his brow was furrowed even more than usual. But he didn't say anything about Arthur's evident exhaustion. He figured that talking about it would just make Arthur angry. He wished he'd been awake to see him in bed next to him.

“Uh, glad to hear it,” he finally said. “Up for something fun today?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Wanna go swimming in Mirror Lake? Get some ice cream?”

“I don’t like ice cream,” Arthur said. He sat down on the bed and held his mug in both hands. Alfred gaped at him.

“You don’t like ice cream? Who doesn’t like ice cream?”

Arthur just shrugged. Alfred changed the subject again.

“Do you have a swimsuit?”

“Not with me.”

“Well, lucky for you, I brought *two*.”

“My hero.” Arthur rolled his eyes. “What even possessed you to bring two swimsuits?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t really know what we were gonna be up to.”

He tried to get Arthur to smile, but it wasn’t working. Maybe he was too tired, or maybe there was something on his mind that he wasn’t telling Alfred. It wasn’t something that Alfred could claim as strange or out of character, because it wasn’t as if in their short time together they had divulged their entire life stories. But they had gotten close enough that Alfred could more or less tell, especially that there was more on Arthur’s mind than he was saying. He’d never pressured him to say anything, because that was a weird thing for someone sharing a hospital room to do. Though, more recently, he’d started to feel that they were growing closer.

*Or maybe it’s my imagination.*

It wasn’t a feeling, an intuition, as much as it was a desperate hope.

“Swimming it is.”



## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## 12

Arthur was afraid to tell Alfred, as he squeezed into one of his swimsuits, that he couldn't really swim. So he didn't. Not until they were on the boardwalk stretching out into the shallow beginnings of the lake. There were other people around, families vacationing with their loud and energetic children, old couples who were enjoying the adventures of their retirement, lonesome travelers who had come to hike the mountain trails that surrounded this watery heaven. Arthur was walking timidly behind Alfred, dragged along by his hand, and was given a refreshed sense of hopelessness each time he saw the blue ripples. Alfred was happy and optimistic and he wouldn't stop talking, wouldn't stop squeezing Arthur's hand as he walked with his flip-flop covered feet toward the water. When they were on the edge, he took them off.

"Man, it is so hot," he breathed. "I am so ready for this."

He let go of Arthur's hand so that he could take off his white t-shirt. He'd given Arthur a black one, and an American Eagle swimsuit. The two matched, both bright in red, white, and blue—Arthur didn't think that they looked different enough to warrant buying both, and he'd said so.

"Why do they both look exactly the same?" he'd said.

"Lay off, dude! I just like the colors."

"Right."

Arthur took his shirt off, too. Alfred removed his glasses and folded them and put them down on the wood next to his shoes and t-shirt.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Arthur sighed. "Just leaving them there?"

"Yeah, it's fine."

“Quite eager to swim, are we?”

“Hell yeah.”

Alfred’s body was a sculpture. It couldn’t be real, Arthur reasoned, as he watched him stretch and take a few steps back. His muscles almost looked drawn on, his tanned skin glimmering beneath the sun. When he moved a single limb, his entire body rippled and glistened. He swallowed and was suddenly, unfairly insecure about his scrawny, pale limbs. And with his jealousy came a heat that wasn’t from the blaring sun, but from a desire generated from within his stomach and worked its way through every tingling inch of his body.

“CANNON BALL!”

“Hold on—!”

He was interrupted when Alfred began to run. Without heeding Arthur’s pleas, he jumped into the air, curling his legs into his chest, and plummeted into the water. His splash was large enough to make the people around him glare, enough to splash his jackets, and enough to make Arthur furious.

“You bloody moron,” he seethed, inching toward the edge. Alfred popped up from beneath the surface, smile beaming, wet hair tangled and matted to his skin. He looked quite at home.

“Come on in, the water’s fine,” he called.

Arthur hesitated. This was the moment. Cautiously, he dipped one of his toes into the water. It wasn’t too cold, but wasn’t quite warm. The perfect temperature for a hot summer day like this.

“Just jump in and you’ll get used to it,” Alfred persisted. Arthur glowered at him, but could say nothing. “Come on! This lifetime would be good.”

“I...”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Actually...”

“I’ll pull you in myself if I have to!” Alfred reached forward for Arthur’s ankle. Arthur yelped and jumped back and clenched his fists.

“I can’t swim, all right?” he cried. Alfred blinked. Arthur knew,

though, that with his eyesight, he wouldn't be able to see the expression on his face. He could've been giving him his middle finger, and Alfred probably wouldn't have known. Arthur was nothing but a blur to him now.

"You...can't swim?"

"No."

"But you live on a fucking island."

"What? Really? Blimey, mate, you're not serious!"

"Fine, I'm sorry," he said, but he was laughing. "You could've said something."

"You just seemed so excited, I didn't want to be po-faced about it."

"Uh, okay, whatever, it's fine. You should come in anyway since you're here."

"Are you deaf? I can't swim!"

"I'll make sure you don't drown, I promise."

Alfred held his hands out and smiled that stupid smile. Arthur puckered his lips and stared down at his fingers, wiggling there in the water.

"You don't even have to jump! Just ease in. The water feels great."

"Al—"

"Please? Pleeaaaaaassee?"

"Would you stop it with that face already?"

"Not until you come in."

"Fine, fine! Fucking hell, I'll get into the bloody water."

Arthur hated that Alfred's eyes, when they got round like that, had such immense power over him. He had yet to escape their grasp.

He sat down on the edge of the boardwalk and put his legs into

the water. Alfred reached his hands out, and Arthur put his hands in his. When Arthur gently began to ease into the water, fear bubbling inside him, Alfred held his arms up in the air with such ease that Arthur felt as if he were grabbing a steady wall of some sort. He went in to about his neck, and then his toes touched ground. Alfred, of course, was right—the water felt amazing on his skin.

“See? Not so bad,” Alfred said.

“Only because I’m holding onto you.”

“That’s okay. You can hold onto me if you need to. Always.”

Arthur stared up into his blank, sightless blue eyes. Even if Arthur were to smile at that moment, in the way that he desperately wanted to, there would be no point. Alfred wouldn’t be able to see it. So he didn’t smile, but he held on more tightly to Alfred’s hands.

“Want to go further?”

“Not unless my feet can touch the ground.”

“Oh, come on, be adventurous!”

“Al, please, I don’t—”

“Come on!”

Moving backwards, Alfred slowly and gently pulled Arthur with him.

“Lift your legs up into the water and kick a little bit,” he instructed. “You won’t sink. I’ve got you, all right?”

Arthur did as he was told, partly because he didn’t have a choice, and partly because Alfred’s voice was so soothing and convincing. He kicked his legs slowly, and gripped Alfred’s hands tightly. Never once did he feel the rock-like support faltering. He felt such awful comfort in knowing that Alfred was holding onto him. He swam. Alfred held his hands, the way that fathers held their sons’ hands when they first taught them how to swim.

“You’re doing great! You’re a natural,” Alfred winked.

“Shut up.”

They swam like that for a time, Arthur kicking and being led

wherever Alfred meandered. After the first few moments of unshakeable trepidation and a totally irrational fear of drowning, Arthur fell into the rhythm and let himself trust in Alfred, in his ability to at least kick his legs, and he found himself enjoying the rhythm of it. The feeling of the fresh lakewater seeping into his skin while the sun warmed his back, looking up and seeing Alfred's wet, smiling face. Hearing around him the laughs, the conversations, the young excited screams, of the people who were joining them in this lake.

"Isn't this so much better than that stuffy hospital room?" Alfred said.

"Yeah."

"Glad you came?"

"Of course."

"Damn, I wish I could see your face," Alfred laughed. "Bet you looked so scared when you first got in."

"I'll have you know that I was actually oozing bravery, you condescending wanker."

"Whatever you say. Hey, maybe we'll get you water wings next time. Or one of those tubes."

"Maybe we should also get some duct tape for that mouth of yours."

"Aw, then I wouldn't be able to laugh at you."

Arthur let go of one of Alfred's hands to splash him in the face. He laughed, and Arthur could have sworn he heard it echoing among the trees, travelling across the surface of the water, engulfing the entire mountain range. They were both smiling now—even if Alfred couldn't see it, Arthur couldn't help it. They spent a lifetime in that lake. At one point, Arthur claimed exhaustion.

"I'm tired, take me back."

"Oh, no you don't. Come here."

Alfred turned his back to Arthur and grabbed his arms and forced them around his neck. Then Alfred grabbed Arthur's legs

beneath the water and held them against his waist. Arthur's chest was pressed to Alfred's back, arms around his neck, legs wrapped around him.

"I'm not done yet, so you're not, either."

"You're proper weird, you know that?"

Even as Arthur said it, he was so happy. Being this close to Alfred. Feeling his body beneath him as he moved so smoothly through the water. Bouncing up and down, fingers squeezing the flesh of Arthur's thighs. He could feel Alfred's breaths and hear his voice reverberating when he brought his ear down to his shoulder.

They sat on the boardwalk and watched the lake when they were done. They'd brought some sandwiches and ate them there on the lake. Alfred was swinging his legs in the water, and Arthur sat cross-legged behind him with a towel draped over his shoulders. He'd put his glasses back on.

"This view is mighty pretty, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad we came here."

"Me, too."

"Are you? Are you really?"

Alfred turned to face him with a sudden, uncharacteristically serious expression. Worry written on his brow like a billboard. Arthur blinked.

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"I just...I wanna make sure you're enjoying yourself, too. After all, I'm the one who dragged you here."

"I mean, it's not the Ritz, but I'm having fun," Arthur replied. He wasn't sure what he could've possibly said to ease Alfred's clear apprehensions. He wished that he knew him well enough for that. "Truly, I am."

"I'm not too loud? Or annoying?"

"What? No."

“That’s a relief,” Alfred smiled. “Mattie says that sometimes I can be a little bit overbearing. I don’t want to annoy you.”

Arthur couldn’t even say anything to that. He’d said it with a smile, his voice dripping with sincerity, the corners of his eyes turning slightly down toward his upturned lips.

“You’re not.”

Arthur did something out of character then, too. Sandwich in hand, he leaned his cheek against Alfred’s shoulder and closed his eyes. It was wet and cold and somehow so soft.

“On the contrary. I quite enjoy your company, love.”

“Me, too.”

*Fucking hell.*

*The frog was right.*

*I think I am in love with him.*

That night, after dinner, Alfred was feeling restless. The knuckles of his fists were tingling anxiously, he couldn’t stop pacing. He needed to move, run, punch something. He changed into his workout clothes, a sleeveless gray shirt and spandex knee shorts, and walked out to the balcony of the room. Arthur was sitting on the chair, feet up on the table, nibbling on some pistachios and reading Sherlock Holmes. When Alfred hopped out, Arthur looked up at him. His eyes ran across his body and he crunched on another pistachio.

“You look very energetic, don’t you?” he said dryly.

“I have a favor to ask you.”

“Do you.”

“So, I want to go down to the gym and work out for a bit—”

“And you want company? You’re like a puppy starved for companionship.”

“I mean, that, and I need someone to hold the punching bag,”

Alfred said. He leaned his elbows against the armrest of Arthur's chair and got up on his toes. He wanted to look very closely into Arthur's eyes, wanted to see the details of those emeralds in all their gem beauty.

"Hold the bag?" Arthur met his eyes without hesitation.

"Yeah. If I don't have anyone to hold it it'll swing all over the place. You know?"

"No."

"You don't even have to change. It's super easy, promise."

"All right, sure."

He wasn't terribly enthusiastic, but Alfred didn't mind. He put his legs down onto the floor and closed his book and stood up, wearing his t-shirt and his shorts. His skin was glistening. Alfred, no longer able to control his impulses, grabbed Arthur's hand. He was used to the feeling of it now. He liked it. They went down to the lobby, on the same floor where the gym was, and went in. François had been right. It wasn't very large, didn't have the most advanced machines, but it had dumbbells and kettlebells and yoga balls and, there in the corner, an old, classic, vintage-looking punching bag. It was hanging from the ceiling. The lights were dim but they were enough. Alfred loved the vibes, like an old movie where the training montages happened. Where the small-town kid becomes a superstar fighter.

"Well, tell me where you want me," Arthur sighed.

"Over here." Alfred led Arthur to the corner and let go of his hand. He stood behind the bag and held it. "Just hold the bag like this. I'm going to punch it, real hard, okay? I need you to keep it in place."

"Yes, Captain."

Arthur came around to where Alfred was standing. Alfred took his hands and put them on the punching bag. His lips were terrifyingly close to Arthur's neck. It smelled like lakewater and cigarettes and the little bags of tea leaves he kept in his bag. His back was warm, his hands smooth, his breathing almost silent. Alfred had to force himself to let go.



“Just hold it there, all right?”

“I’m not daft, I understood you the first time.”

“Get ready, I can punch pretty hard.”

“I should hope so.”

Alfred wrapped up his hands, so that he wouldn’t bloody his knuckles. Then he got into his stance and lifted his fists up. He glanced quickly into Arthur’s eyes.

Then he let his fists fly.

Alfred always found that he was much slower, much weaker, against an immobile punching bag than he was against an actual opponent. Into whose eyes he could look and say, I’m going to beat the shit out of you now, and I’m going to be champion. But he punched, stepped, kicked anyway. He felt the pressure of the bag against his wrapped knuckles and his bare shins, watched it sway slightly only for Arthur to stand his ground and keep it in place. He warmed up for a few moments, and then he went harder. Punched as much as he could, kept on his toes. After a bit, he could see the puddle of sweat gathering at his toes. He kept moving.

But there was something amiss. Something that was different this time than all the other times. He was so much slower, his punches so much weaker, everything frustrating. He felt like there was somebody laying down grabbing his ankles and holding him down.

He was stopping every minute or so to fix his glasses. They kept sliding down, kept getting in his face, in his way. Each time the frustration grew a little bit more.

Finally he couldn’t take it.

“Hold on, hold on,” he breathed, forcing his hands back down to his sides. Arthur peeked from behind the bag.

“Something wrong? I thought you were doing quite well.”

“These glasses are fucking me up,” he said.

“I don’t know much about fighting—or any athletics, for that matter—but it seemed to me that you were doing fine even with the glasses.”

“No, no, I wasn’t.”

Alfred ripped off his glasses and stared at the fogging-up lenses. He knew it was dramatic. He knew it was overreacting.

*It’s so fucking stupid.*

But seeing them was like a terrible, hellish reminder. He felt himself back in that hospital bed, completely blind, unable to move. Thinking that he would never fight again—will I ever fight again? He could’ve sworn he could see Braginsky’s terrifying, cruel face reflected in those lenses, could hear his voice saying, “I knew I was going to crush you, you know.”

“I’m gonna try without them,” Alfred said.

“Are you sure that’s—?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Just keep holding the bag.”

He put his glasses aside. Everything was now covered in a film of mist, hazy clouds. He could see the black blob that was the punching bag, could see the pale silhouette of Arthur standing behind it. He convinced himself that even if he couldn’t see, even if he was almost legally blind, he could fight without the glasses holding him down.

*I can fight.*

*I’m fine.*

“I’m fine.”

He swung at the bag. His fist collided, but the impact surprised him. He had hardly been expecting to actually hit it. He swung again. Why was he so hesitant? Why would a little blurriness keep him from punching as strong as he could? He swung again. The bag felt foreign.

“Al...”

“I’m fine.”

He missed. He lost his balance. He swung again and he missed again. Everything was spinning.

“Alfred.”

Arthur’s voice was the only clarity in the chaos that was

unfurling, the crippling haziness. He stumbled and put his palms to the bag and pressed his forehead against it. Reality was catching up to him, nipping at his ankles as he ran as fast as he could. He thought he'd gotten pretty far.

"I can't fight, I can't do it," he whispered.

"Yes, you can. Remember what the doctor said? If you get some contact lenses—"

"It's not about the *fucking* glasses!" Alfred screamed. It didn't sound like his own voice. He banged his head against the punching bag and kept his eyes closed. "There's no way that someone like me can beat someone like him. Someone who completely crushed me. Not when he broke me into so many pieces...I can't even fucking see."

"Alfred."

"How do I come back from that? How the hell do I pick myself up from that?"

Alfred lifted his fists to swing them again, this time in pure anger, but in the darkness he felt Arthur's fingers wrapping around his wrists. Holding them still. He was definitely weaker than Alfred, but there was something in his touch that gave him complete strength.

"By giving yourself time to heal. By taking deep breaths," Arthur said quietly. Alfred opened his eyes. He wanted so badly to see the face that Arthur was making, but he couldn't for the life of him make it out.

"I can't see your face," he murmured. His voice cracked and stumbled and his eyes stung. "I can't see you standing right in front of me."

"Close your eyes, Alfred."

"What?"

"Just close them."

Alfred closed his eyes. Arthur's hands were still around his wrists. His fingers moved to Alfred's and brought them up to his face in the darkness, the silence, beneath the old lightbulbs of this old gym.

"Tell me what you feel."

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do. Tell me. What do you feel?”

“I feel...your eyelashes. You’re blinking.”

“No peeking.”

“S-sorry.”

“Okay, eyelashes. Now what do you feel?”

Arthur guided Alfred’s fingers along these ravishing uncharted lands.

“Your nose. The edges of your nostrils.”

“Good. Now what?”

“Your cheeks, I think?”

“And now?”

“Your lips. They’re really soft.”

“How about now...?”

He felt his palm press against Arthur’s chest.

“Your heartbeat.”

“Is it loud?”

“Yeah.”

“You can feel it really clearly, right?”

Alfred nodded.

“See?” Arthur’s voice was low and soothing. It sounded like the crackling of fire, the stirring of hot chocolate, on cold winter days. “Even if you can’t see me, you can feel me. You can feel every part of me, standing in front of you. You can hear my voice. You don’t need to see me to know that I’m here, or that I’m talking to you, or that my heart is beating.”

Tears, rebellious, spilled from Alfred’s closed eyes. He opened them. Arthur’s face was so close. He was right. Even if Alfred couldn’t

make out the details of his face, he knew it was there. He felt it there. The heartbeat, the breaths that were falling on his lips.

Alfred lifted his hand from Arthur's chest and put it against his cheek. It fit so nicely in his palm, and it was so warm. With his other hand, he squeezed Arthur's fingers.

"Hey, Arthur."

"Hmm?"

"Can I kiss you?"

"...Why?"

"Because I'm really scared that if I don't do it now, I'll never get the chance to."

"That's not what I mean," Arthur said. "I mean, why do you have to ask?"

Alfred could feel Arthur's smile then. He didn't have to see it for it to warm him from the depths of his soul.

"Okay."

He leaned forward and he put his lips to Arthur's. He kissed him for years, centuries, lifetimes, an eternity.

He kissed him because it was the only thing he could've done, the only thing that he knew, with absolute certainty, was right. Everything else might've been wrong—absolutely everything. But this was right. Kissing Arthur was right.

Chapter End Notes

halfway there ♪ (─■\_■) ♪

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## 13

Alfred kissed him really hard. He wanted to feel his lips in such excruciating detail that he would never forget them, even if he never got to kiss him again. Even if it was just right now, he wanted to remember it until he died. He'd wanted to kiss him since the moment he first saw him, after all. And still the rush of elation, the sudden otherworldly experience, was surprising. Shocked him from his very core. He kissed Arthur's lips with everything that he had. He'd never known how to do anything otherwise.

He pulled away after who-knows-how-long because he couldn't breathe. But he stayed close—he couldn't bear to move away, not even a little bit. He kept his forehead against Arthur's, his hands now on both his cheeks, the wet edges of their lips brushing. A hair between them, breaths that were the size of the universe colliding.

"Arthur," he sighed. He brushed the smooth, flushed skin beneath his eye, felt Arthur's eyelashes brushing his fingertips like feathers. In the silence, Arthur reached his own fingers up, and he put them to Alfred's lower lip. They were gentle and teasing and Alfred wondered if his lips felt anything like velvet. He puckered them and he kissed Arthur's fingers as they walked the paths laid before them. Taking those lands for himself, stealing Alfred's breaths and making them his own.

He leaned forward that extra inch and kissed him again. He kissed him harder this time, as hard as he could. There was desperation, longing—every single feeling that had been building since he'd first seen Arthur in that wheelchair—spilling into that kiss. He shut his eyes so tightly that he saw flashing colors in their darkness. He felt the vibrations of Arthur's groan and it sent him that much further into insanity. He held his face more tightly, dug his fingers up into the tendrils of Arthur's tangled hair. Alfred opened his lips to let Arthur swallow every breath, every word that was sitting on his eager tongue. He pushed it to taste every corner. Took a step forward until Arthur's back was to the wall, their chests pressed together, no place to go but toward each other.

Alfred tried to be gentle at first, but there wasn't much he could do to control himself. He ran his tongue along the outlines of Arthur's open lips, and then pushed in further until their tongues crashed in deep, heavy colors. Arthur's fingers gripped the front of Alfred's sweat-covered shirt. When his arms moved around to his back, he put strings in Alfred's skin and made him a puppet. Controlled him with the way that they danced, beneath his shirt along his bare skin, dug his fingernails in when Alfred tugged lightly on his hair and sighed into him.

"Ah, Al..."

Arthur leaned his head back against the wall and let his eyes flutter closed. His hands still gripped Alfred like claws. Alfred put his hands against Arthur's waist and then pressed his lips to his arched, pale neck. Could feel the silent vibrations and quiet movements of Arthur's body. Like he was dancing to the music of Alfred's breaths. He drew circles, painted pictures, sang songs against Arthur's skin. Felt the heat of Arthur's raspy breaths against his head.

He brought his head up for a moment and touched it to Arthur's.

"Arthur," he said again. He suddenly couldn't get enough of saying his name. "Arthur, are you okay?"

"Perfect," he replied. "You?"

Alfred smiled and kissed him again. Kissed him until he laughed and wrapped his arms around Alfred's neck. Alfred was working off instinct now. So, apparently, was Arthur. Before Alfred could do anything else, Arthur's hands slipped beneath his shirt and pulled it up, over his head, tossed it to the floor. Alfred laughed and brought his arms beneath Arthur's legs.

"Al—!"

He lifted Arthur's legs up, and they wrapped naturally and easily around his waist. Arthur was light (or maybe Alfred was just strong), and Alfred didn't have any problems holding him up against the wall. He kissed him while he held him up, letting his lips touch the tip of his nose, his cheeks, his fluttering eyelids, his forehead. Down to his jawbone, then he traced a river with his tongue down to his throat. As their breath mingled, Arthur pulled, and Alfred pressed his hips up against Arthur's. They groaned together, sighed out in the hidden, muffled pleasure. Alfred's hips swiveled slightly, and Arthur gave a deep moan.

“Alfred...” he murmured.

“Come on, don’t do that,” Alfred smirked. He reached his mouth up to brush Arthur’s red, hot ear. “It drives me nuts.”

“Oh, does it?” Arthur’s fingertips hovered over Alfred’s shivering, sweating skin. Ran up his spine, as he leaned forward and said Alfred’s name again. Into his ear, his voice wet and heavy. “Alfred.”

“Fuck, you’re too sexy.”

Alfred’s body was shaking. Not because it was getting hard to support Arthur, but because it was swiftly driving itself mad with desire. He’d never imagined this kind of lust inside himself. He smothered Arthur’s lips with his own, as if to drink up that sweet voice of his.

Suddenly, just outside the door, they heard footsteps.

*“Shit.”*

Alfred lowered Arthur back to the floor, though he could hardly see anything without his glasses. Before they could find their bearings, the door opened. Alfred couldn’t see what the person looked like—a man, perhaps? Not François...not Antonio, he didn’t think. Another visitor to Lake Placid staying at the inn? Either way, the person was only in there for a few moments, before turning and walking back out without a word.

As soon as the footsteps had drawn out of earshot, Arthur and Alfred looked at each other, and burst into dizzy, uncontrollable laughter. Holding their stomachs, bending over, the nature of the situation becoming a little bit too much.

“I wish you could have seen the look on the poor bloke’s face!” Arthur cried.

“I can only imagine it!”

“Like he’d walked in on a ghost or something!”

Arthur picked up Alfred’s shirt from the ground, but he didn’t hand it back to him. Instead, he put it on for him. Then he grabbed Alfred’s glasses. Alfred’s world shifted into clarity as Arthur put his glasses on for him, his face so close that their noses were nearly touching.



“Better?” he murmured. There were still tears at the corners of his eyes from the laughter, a small smile on his lips. His face red and flushed but happy, childish, beautiful. Alfred nodded and smiled back.

“Even if I know you’re there, it’s still nice to see your face clearly.”

They grabbed each other’s hands and went back up to their room. Before Alfred had even closed the door, Arthur was taking his clothes off—shoes, shirt, pants. At that sight, Alfred became rushed and his breathing became ragged and desperate. He threw his own shirt to the ground and reached forward and kissed Arthur again. There would be no interruptions this time. Only the wind blowing outside, the sun as it disappeared behind the horizon, the rippling of the lake. Arthur fell onto his back in the bed, pulling Alfred with him. He set himself between Arthur’s legs and they couldn’t seem to get close enough. Chest-to-chest, hip-to-hip, lips-to-lips, tongue-to-tongue, breath-to-breath-to-breath. Alfred put his hands to Arthur’s face and brushed the hair back from his forehead so he could see his face clearly. His lips were parted and quivering and wet, his eyes sleepy and shimmering, his skin like the bleeding sunset sky.

“Arthur,” he said again. His fingers traced down Arthur’s arms and then grabbed his hands, pressed them down to the bed. Arthur opened his mouth but said nothing, leaving himself hanging and vulnerable beneath him. “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

Alfred paused to kiss his lips because they looked so nice. Their legs were intertwining like tangled rope.

“Don’t get weirded out, okay?”

“I can make no promises.”

“I’ve wanted this since the first time I saw you.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

“Wanted...what? To fuck me?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“Really? That’s surprising. I must have looked like shit in that hospital room.”

Alfred shook his head vigorously. He was suddenly very tired and affectionate. He put his lips down to Arthur's skinny, bare shoulder, and let his forehead fall against the pillow.

"You looked beautiful. Like, unfairly beautiful."

Arthur didn't say anything. But he squeezed Alfred's fingers.

"I wanted to kiss you. I wanted to touch you—god, that sounds so weird," he scoffed.

"Yeah, it does."

"But I wanted to get to know you." Alfred kissed his shoulder again, and pressed his lips longer.

"And? Now that you have, what is your verdict?"

"That I still wanna fuck you. But it's not just that anymore." Alfred's voice was lower, a bit more hoarse now. He felt Arthur catch his breath. "This must sound so crazy. I mean, we've only known each other a few weeks..."

"It's okay. I'm used to crazy."

"I want to brush your hair after you shower, and get the tangles out for you. I want to light your cigarettes for you. I want to buy you all the chocolate you could ever want, just to see you smile. You know? Have you ever felt like that? Like you've known someone for your whole life, even if you haven't, and you just...you want to make them happy. Do all the little things that you've noticed they like, because maybe it would convince them to love you back."

He'd let the world slip.

Love.

He hadn't really meant to say it (how could he know if he actually meant something like that? It had just slipped!), and now it was hanging in the air like the mist after heavy rain. He caught his breath, too. Neither of them said a word for about a minute, but it felt like longer than that. He didn't want to take it back, but he was afraid of how Arthur would react. Alfred hadn't even had this conversation with himself, and it was scaring him.

The fear dissipated when Arthur let go of Alfred's hands and

wrapped his arms around his neck and hugged him.

“Yeah. I’ve felt that.”

“Really?”

“Mhmm.”

“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t really know what else to call it though, you know? What do you even call it when there’s nothing in the world you want more than to see someone smile? Or when you just want to spend all of your time with someone? Isn’t that love?”

“Probably.”

“It has to be, right? Like, what else is there?”

“Wanting to fuck someone, I suppose.”

“Sure, but I’ve got that, too.”

“You’re funny, Al.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. And bold. And very brave.”

“Like, in an annoying way?”

Arthur shook his head. Alfred could hear his voice in his ear, could feel his arms holding him more tightly and his hair brushing his cheek. He loved this feeling so much, so much, so very much.

“No, not in an annoying way.”

“You know, I thought you hated me at first.”

“I think I did hate you at first.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you had all the energy and the strength that I didn’t.”

“That’s a hero’s job.

“Please spare me.”

“Do you think it would be bullshit if I told you I loved you?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Alfred turned his head and kissed Arthur’s cheek. “I love you.”

“Why?”

“Jeez, don’t ask me that!”

“You have to have a reason.”

“Well, for one thing, you look like a fucking god.”

“That can’t be it. I’m too much of an asshole for my looks to be worth it.”

“Uh, well...can I be honest?”

“No, please, I love when people lie to me.”

“Right, stupid question. Well, I think one reason is because you were the person who appeared in my life when it was spiraling out of control. Right place, right time kind of thing.”

“That makes sense. But that doesn’t really have anything to do with *me*. Based on that logic, you could have very well fallen in love with your nurse.”

“That’s true. But...I don’t know. Explaining love is hard.”

“I know.” Arthur began to nibble lightly on Alfred’s ear. His tongue ran along its edges, wet its outline, sent shivers of pleasure down Alfred’s spine. “But I can tell you why I love you.”

“Really?”

“Sure. For one thing, you never left me behind. Not once. Not even when you had the chance to escape and never look back. You took the one reminder of that terrible hospital room with you.”

“I didn’t think of it that way.”

“Maybe not consciously.” Arthur blew into his ear. “The hospital

room, the fire escape, coming all the way out here...you went out of your way. That means something.”

“Can I tell you a secret? I did it really selfishly. I did it because I wanted to spend more time with you.”

“I don’t care your intentions, really.”

“Is that it?”

“No.” Arthur paused, his voice hitched, when Alfred’s tongue began to swivel against the skin of his shoulder. “You’re bright and hopeful, even in the worst situation. So you helped me be bright and hopeful. Even in the worst situation. You never judged me, you just tried your best to help me.”

“Come on, I bet a lot of people do that.”

“You would lose that bet, love.”

“What else?”

“As if you need your ego boosted,” Arthur laughed. “Well...having you in that hospital room with me made a difference. Maybe what I feel for you isn’t actually love, but some sort of strange nameless emotion that only exists between people who are sick and broken together. Maybe it could have very well been someone else, like an especially kind nurse or a different person in the bed next to me. But I don’t think so. And I don’t know what to call that emotion, so love it is.”

“I think love is like a big umbrella, and there are different types that fall underneath it.”

“Shakespearean, my dear.”

“And I don’t think it would’ve happened with anyone else.”

“No?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll admit, that’s a relief to hear.”

“Maybe it’s just because you’re a super sexy model.”

“Bite me.”

Alfred actually bit him. Gently, on his shoulder. Arthur let out a yelp of pain and a burst of laughter, but he held on more tightly to Alfred's neck.

"Hey, Arthur."

"Mm, what now?"

"Can I fuck you?"

"I don't know, can you?"

"You know what, I've changed my mind, I don't want to anymore."

Arthur laughed and held on so that even if Alfred had wanted to escape, he couldn't have. Alfred laughed, too. They laughed together.

He bent down and he kissed Arthur so that he could drink his laughter. Arthur fell more deeply into the mattress and wrapped his arms around Alfred's neck, dug his fingers into his back and left his imprints there. As they kissed, snaked their tongues around each other and groaned into their lips, Alfred ran his hands down Arthur's bare, smooth body. It rose and fell in response to his touch, quivered slightly, while Arthur sighed out heavily, audibly. He spread his legs further so that Alfred could press his hips against his more tightly, his fingers tracing down Arthur's body. They moved along his chest, warm and light, and with his right hand he began to massage Arthur's nipple. In surprise, or pleasure (he hoped), Arthur pulled away from the kiss to groan, to suck in his breath. Alfred smiled--your face is so red, Arthur--and put his lips instead to his neck. He could feel, against his hips, Arthur rising up beneath his pants. Pleasure erupted through his body, so he kissed harder and he twisted Arthur's nipple.

"Fuck, Al," he breathed. He let his legs squeeze Alfred's waist, pulling him in tighter. Alfred opened his lips and moaned into Arthur's ear, his voice wet and dripping. As he watched Arthur's open lips, fluttering eyelids, quivering body, he moved his hand down to the rim of Arthur's boxers. He slid his hand down, teased Arthur's rising cock with his thumb. When Arthur's sigh left his open lips, heat spread through every inch of Alfred's body. He shut his eyes, tightly, for a few moments, and wrapped his fingers around the shaft. He pressed his thumb to the head, and pumped slowly, forcing Arthur's boxers further down. He took a moment to appreciate how weird it was to jack off someone wearing *his* boxers, but then the moment passed.

“God...” Arthur fingers clawed at Alfred’s back while his body writhed in pleasure. His lips were wet and wide, his complexion rosy, his hair fanning out in every direction.

“Fuck, you’re so sexy,” Alfred moaned. Moved his hand a bit faster, rubbed the tip with his thumb. He leaned down and traced the line of Arthur’s lips with his tongue, tasted every bit of him. Arthur opened his eyes and smiled, running his hands up and down Alfred’s spine.

“Come-- *mmf* --now, Al,” he said, when Alfred’s hand had begun pumping fast and hard and Arthur could hardly get the words out. He reached down and grabbed Alfred’s wrist to stop him. “This hardly seems fair.”

“Huh? What are you...?”

“I’ve said it-- *ah* --before, haven’t I?” He used his grip on Alfred’s neck to help himself sit up. “I may be an asshole, but I’m not totally rude.”

“I don’t--”

Alfred’s voice cut off when Arthur kissed his chest. Chastely, at first. Pressing his lips to his skin, legs still wrapped around his waist even as he sat up. Arthur was completely naked by this point. Alfred still had his shorts on. After a few moments, Arthur pushed against his chest with his thick, nimble tongue, traced a path from the center of his chest down toward his stomach. Alfred closed his eyes and leaned back, losing himself in the warm and tingling sensations.

“Mm,” he sighed.

Suddenly Arthur’s fingers were pulling down his shorts, his boxers, and his cock sprung up--harder than he’d even realized it was. Arthur ran his hands up to Alfred’s shoulders and pushed him back, gently. Alfred let himself fall down to his elbows. He glanced down and saw Arthur, hands now beneath Alfred’s legs, staring up at him. He licked his lips and smiled, and Alfred went insane.

“You’re not the only one with experience, love,” he murmured.

“Fuck.”

Arthur closed his eyes and reached his tongue out, excruciatingly slowly--fucking *taunting* me--until it touched the head of Alfred’s cock.

It wrapped around him, wet and warm, and the sudden sensations combined with the expression on Arthur's red face as he did it sent Alfred into a whirlwind. Arthur took him in slowly, kept moving his tongue around and around as he pushed himself further down. He ran his tongue up the bottom, brought his lips back up and then bobbed down again. He went slowly, using one hand to hold his cock from the bottom and the other hand to squeeze into his thigh. Alfred couldn't take it. He let his eyes close and leaned back onto the bed all the way, hardly able to hear even his own breathy moans. He put his hands delicately into Arthur's hair and helped push him further, cocked his hips up. Slowly, to make sure he wasn't forcing Arthur to take in more than he could. To his surprise, though, when he pushed his hips up, Arthur leaned down and took all of him. All the way.

"Shit, you weren't-- *oh, god* --lying," Alfred smirked. Instead of responding, Arthur squeezed his thigh and moaned while he moved his tongue in circles. The involuntary moan that left Alfred's mouth then was long and loud and he couldn't remember the last time he had felt such intense, intimate pleasure with someone in bed. He tugged lightly on Arthur's tangled hair. He started to move faster, taking Alfred all the way in and then bobbing up, sliding his tongue and releasing sensual, wet muffled groans. While Alfred closed his eyes and saw colors flashing, lost track of where he was and what he was doing, moving his hips and drinking in every sensation of Arthur's mouth.

"Arthur, *fuck*, don't-- *aah* --don't fucking stop," he heard himself sigh. But, like the cruel asshole that he was, Arthur did stop.

"I can't let you come just yet," he smiled, breathing heavy and hitched. Alfred opened his eyes and looked up at him. "Didn't you say you wanted to fuck me?"

"So fucking badly," Alfred sighed.

"Do you have a condom?"

"In my...uh, in my bag, I think. Fuck, did I bring any?"

"Do you at least have lube? Hold on, wait, no, I think I have some."

They scrambled for their bags, but they were both shaking and it was hard to navigate in the warm darkness.

"Okay, yeah, I have a condom," he said, relieved.



“And I have lube.”

“Gnarly.”

“Shut the fuck up, Yank.”

Arthur watched Alfred bite the condom wrapper open, grinning while he slipped it over his already-wet cock. When he was finished, Arthur handed him the lube, leaned back against the headboard and spread his legs. Fuck, he looked so fucking sexy, Alfred could hardly stand to look at him. But just before he squirted the lube out, he paused.

“Shit,” he murmured.

“What is it now?”

“I...I haven’t actually done this in...uh, in a while...”

“Oh?”

Arthur raised his eyebrows and gave a crooked smile. He reached his hand out for the lube.

“Would you like me to show you, then?” he murmured. Alfred blinked at him, unsure of how to respond.

Arthur bit down on his lower lip and squeezed a sizeable amount of lube onto his hand. He spread it onto his fingers, settled onto the mattress, spread his legs out and kept his eyes fervently on Alfred’s. Deliberately and evidently with experience, he brought his hand down to his ass spread his cheeks, and everything was there on display for Alfred. He shivered, despite how hot he felt. With his own fingers, Arthur began at the rim, moving slowly and squirming ever so slightly.

“Mm.”

Arthur sighed as he put one of his fingers in, his toes curling. He went in deeply, bending and straightening his finger, groaning and squirming and still, always, keeping his eyes on Alfred. Giving him a show, it seemed, and Alfred was practically drooling. He put a second finger in and sighed again, harder, his breaths intoxicating. He was leaning back heavily now, touching himself and flushed from the pleasure.

“Arthur,” Alfred murmured. He crawled forward on the bed and put his hand to Arthur’s cheek. He turned into Alfred’s palm, and Alfred’s thumb traced his lower lip. “I must be fucking dreaming.”

He kissed Arthur’s lips and reached down to grab his wrist. Arthur began to nod, and he wrapped his slender arms again around Alfred’s neck. Alfred put his hands against Arthur’s waist and gently, nervously (why am I so nervous?) put the tip of his cock against Arthur’s asshole. Before he even pushed in, Arthur moaned and arched his neck back. Alfred couldn’t help but smile.

“Fucking hell, how long is it going to take you?” Arthur said, his voice hoarse. Alfred kept smiling, kissed him, and pushed in. He slid in with relative ease--Arthur wasn’t terribly tight, and the lube helped. The pleasure, both physical and emotional, of actually being inside him were overwhelming. Alfred’s forehead fell down against the headboard as he squeezed Arthur’s legs, pushed until he was in all the way, driven forward by Arthur’s unsteady, musical moans. As he slid his cock in, Arthur grinded down, pulling on Alfred’s waist with his legs. There was no doubt that his fingernails were leaving marks in Alfred’s skin.

Alfred hadn’t been lying. It really had been a long time since he’d had sex with a guy. He thrust, feeling the dripping tip of Arthur’s penis against his stomach, and tried desperately to remember the trick.

*Fuck, I’ve done it before, I know how...*

He pushed in, moving the direction a little bit and going deeper every time. He couldn’t admit to Arthur that he had actually forgotten how to hit the prostate.

*How do you even forget that kind of thing? It just happens, right?*

Their bodies quivered, pressing to each other as tightly as they could, as Alfred groaned and thrust faster and faster. The pleasure was white and unfathomable. He kept shifting, desperate to hear Arthur’s cries of pleasure when he finally hit the sweet spot.

“Harder,” Arthur breathed, banging his head back. “Ah...”

*Fuck, he’s not feeling it enough.*

He put one of his fingers to Arthur’s nipple and twisted it, trembling when he moaned. He traced the outline of his ear with his

tongue. All while he desperately pushed in, out, sweating and red.

“Al-- god, Al,” he breathed. Alfred tucked his hips under a bit more, pushed his cock in at an upward angle, and lifted Arthur’s legs higher.

*This is it, right?*

He felt his cock graze a ball-shaped structure, and in the next moment, Arthur was screaming.

*“Yes, yes, fuck, harder, there--ahh, Alfred!”*

Alfred hit the same spot again. He hit it again, and again, over and over, as he felt himself approaching his own climax. To push Arthur just that much further, he reached down and grabbed his throbbing cock and pumped it, kept thrusting, moaned into his ear.

*“Fuck, fuck , I’m--!”*

They came at the same time. Alfred stiffened and pushed his hips up once more, gripped Arthur’s hips desperately and cried his name. In the same moment, Arthur arched his back and his body trembled and he came over his body, over Alfred’s body, over the sheets that they would now have to change.

They were breathless, sweating, glowing like morning stars.

Neither of them could really believe that it had happened, and that it had been so magnificent.

They had kissed each other and fallen into these sheets together, rolled around with groans and moans and hoarse breaths like animals, screams from their most instinctive selves ringing out in this stuffy room. They had fucked with fervor and with vigor and with intense, bright red passion. The words that spilled from their pleasure-driven lips were words of love and affection and, inevitably, pleasant confusion. They really weren’t sure if it was love, but they didn’t care, and were content with calling it that and falling into its mold. They loved each other in that bed, calling each other’s names as their tongues did a tango and their fingers a tarantella.

I love you, fuck me, where’s the lube, where’s the condom, fuck did I bring any, oh here they are, Alfred, Arthur, harder, faster, are you okay, I’m wonderful, sorry I’m so sweaty, your glasses are crooked, you’re so sexy, I love you, I love you, I love you.

They slept in each other's arms, and woke up in the middle of the night to fuck again, but almost didn't because Alfred couldn't find another condom. Arthur had one in his bag, a fact even he was surprised about. Neither of them questioned it.

When they were tired out again, they went to sleep and didn't wake up until one o'clock the next day tangled up and sweating and curled together, when the sun was already up and the lake already sparkling and the world turning once more.

## Chapter End Notes

I changed the rating to explicit...

(👁👁🌸)

The next day, the weather was perfect. Arthur couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so soundly—perhaps, he reasoned, the sensation of having someone's arms around him, someone's legs fitting into the creases of his knees, someone's breath falling evenly on the back of his neck, helped him sleep. It was something he had to admit to himself despite his pride. When he'd woken up in the middle of the night, he'd been able to turn and bury his face into Alfred's chest and fall asleep once more to the beat of his heart. There was something so magnificent about that, something that put a smile on his lips before he'd even sat up in bed. He stretched his arms and felt the spot next to him. It was warm and it smelled like Alfred.

Alfred, though, was not in bed. He was out on the balcony, with the radio playing from his phone. He was sitting up on the railing, turning over his shoulder to gaze at the lake. His hair was wet, his skin flushed and bronzed, wearing only his boxers—decorated with fireworks and the colors of the American flag. When he saw that Arthur was awake, he smiled and he waved. Like a child riding a Ferris wheel, finding his father in a sea of faces and eager to grab his attention. Hello, I'm here, he said, even though you're over there. I'll be there in a moment.

"G'morning," he called. His voice was just a bit hoarse, but energetic and optimistic. Arthur sat up and rubbed his eyes and was loath to see how much like shit he looked.

"Good morning," he replied. Alfred grabbed his phone and came back inside, though he left the balcony door open. It was playing NPR. News about the ongoing presidential elections—a touchy topic that Arthur had once tried to bring up with Alfred, only to be met with a quick and deliberate change of subject. He turned off the radio and walked to the bed.

Alfred leaned down and put his lips to Arthur's forehead.

It was such a simple thing to do, almost natural for people who had made such ferocious love the night before, and still it took down every last brick of Arthur's walls. He closed his eyes and felt the cool dryness (you should wear more chapstick, Al) of his lips.

“Did you sleep well?” Alfred asked.

“Quite. You?”

“Best sleep I’ve had in years.”

Alfred winked and moved to the closet. He began to sift through his clothes, Arthur’s eyes immovable from his back. He was acting almost exactly the same. Like nothing had changed in the hours after they’d fucked, said ‘love’ more times than they could count. He walked effortlessly, spoke naturally, smiled and smiled and smiled. Arthur was amazed and relieved. He, for one, had felt the shift in his heart. Had felt it teetering on the edge of uncertainty, only to dive in headfirst when Alfred had said the words “I love you” and discarded every ounce of doubt. He had been so relieved—I’m not the only one who’s fallen in love, I’m not going crazy. Or, if I am, at least the two of us are going crazy together.

“Were you comfortable last night? I can get a bit aggressive when I’m sharing a bed,” Alfred said. “My brother claims that I used to kick him off the bed.”

“No, you didn’t do anything like that,” Arthur replied. He hadn’t moved from the bed. He grabbed the remote by the nightstand and turned on the TV absentmindedly. “You’re quite affectionate, though. I don’t think you let go of me once.”

“How could I? You’re so damn cute.”

Alfred hopped over to the bed again and kissed Arthur’s unsuspecting lips. Arthur couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped him, couldn’t stop the flutters in his stomach. Alfred pulled away and touched his cheeks and put his lips to the tip of Arthur’s nose.

“I hope it didn’t bother you,” he murmured.

“No. Not at all.”

They kissed again. Just before Alfred pulled away to finish getting dressed, he let his tongue slide along Arthur’s lower lip, leaving him red-faced and breathless.

*How did this happen?*

*Is this what I was imagining when he first introduced himself in that hospital room?*

“Is there a plan for today?” he finally asked.

“Whatever you want,” Alfred shrugged. “We could go swimming again, hiking, lie low here...”

“A hike sounds nice.”

“Yeah? Awesome.”

Suddenly, Arthur heard his name spoken. Not by Alfred, but by the woman speaking on the television. He realized that he had switched to one of those gossip celebrity channels, and his face was being displayed—a flattering picture, one from his winter 2015 Vivienne Westwood campaign.

“Hey, it’s you!” Alfred sat down, practically hopping, onto the bed and nonchalantly put his head down in Arthur’s lap. “So you didn’t lie. You actually are famous.”

“Bugger off.”

“A few days ago, rising supermodel Arthur Kirkland, who had been admitted to a hospital in New York City, snuck out of his hospital room. His current whereabouts are unknown, and his manager, Kiku Honda, has filed a missing person’s report—”

Here, they showed a picture of Kiku, looking put-together and pristine for the camera. Maybe in another life, he had been a supermodel himself. It would explain his uncanny knowledge of the industry.

“Kiku did *what?*” Arthur screamed. He jumped, essentially forcing Alfred’s head from its comfortable spot on his lap. “Al, can I borrow your phone?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Here.”

Arthur whipped the phone from his outstretched hand and frantically began typing numbers. He was grateful, now more than ever, that he had memorized Kiku’s phone number—even more grateful that Kiku had insisted on spending money on an international SIM card for their travels. It was terribly rare for Kiku to not answer his phone, and Arthur was confident that he was still in New York City. All he needed to do was call him and calmly explain the situation and tell him that he would be back in a few days.

“Kiku Honda speaking.”

“Kiku, mate, it’s me.”

“Arthur! Oh, I’m so happy to hear from you.”

“I’m sorry, I should’ve called you earlier.”

“Yes, you should’ve. I thought you were kidnapped, or maybe worse...”

“No, no, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Thank goodness. Where are you?”

“Lake Placid.”

“Lake Placid? Why?” His slight accent was muffled over the phone, its monotonous tone still perfectly intact.

“Well, Alfred and I—”

“Alfred? The man who was in the hospital room with you?”

“That’s him.”

“What did he do to you? Should I file charges?”

“No, Kiku, no. Everything’s fine. We agreed to come here together.”

“Are you seriously telling me that you snuck out of the hospital room, with a stranger, to take a little vacation to Lake Placid? While you still hadn’t been discharged and was receiving inpatient treatment?”

“Yes.”

“Arthur.”

“Listen, Kiku, I just need a break. That’s all. The hospital and the treatment wasn’t helping. I think this is what I need.”

“Is Alfred holding you hostage? If he is, say ‘two pepperonis, please.’”

“Kiku, no! I’m telling you, I’ve not been kidnapped. Everything is



perfectly okay. I'll be back in New York City in a few days. I promise that from now on I'll keep you posted."

While he was talking, Alfred quietly and teasingly crawled back into bed. As Arthur tried his hardest to keep Kiku from hearing, Alfred wrapped his arms around Arthur's waist and rocked him back and forth, whispered terrible puns in his ears, blew on the back of his neck. Arthur had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing.

"You promise? If anything goes wrong, you'll call right away."

"You have my word," Arthur squeaked.

"All right. Well, I suppose I'll alert the authorities that you're not actually missing."

"Wonderful, you do that."

"I'll talk to you soon, Arthur."

"Til then, mate. Cheers."

As soon as he'd hung up, he fell into uncontrollable laughter.

"Al! Can't you let me get through one damn phone call?"

"No. You're only allowed to talk to me." He blew a raspberry on the back of his neck, then rocked him so hard that they both fell into the sheets. "I've kidnapped you, see. Kiku was right. You're my hostage."

Alfred positioned himself on top of Arthur, playfully pinned his wrists to the bed. He leaned down and lowered his voice and Arthur bit his lower lip to keep the heat beneath his skin from overwhelming him.

"My, how scary," he cooed.

"If you don't do exactly what I say, I'll do terrible things to you," Alfred murmured. His breath falling upon Arthur's lips. "I'll force you to come swimming with me again. I'll make you drink tea straight from the microwave."

"My god has forsaken me."

"I'll kiss you and I'll cuddle you until you just can't take it anymore."

“Anything but cuddles.”

“I’ll blow raspberries on your neck again.” He leaned down and put his lips to Arthur’s neck and he blew another raspberry, making his sensitive skin tingle.

“Al, stop!”

“I’ll even tickle you.”

“Don’t you dare—!”

But it was too late. As the sunlight fell upon the dusty bedsheets, Alfred dug his fingers into the ticklish areas of Arthur’s stomach, making him writhe and kick and, in vain, try to push him away. Their laughter must have been so loud that anybody taking their stay on the floor could hear it, perhaps even the people out on the lake could hear it. Like bells, or a symphony. Arthur couldn’t breathe, but it was such beautiful breathlessness. Even as he pushed Alfred away, he wanted him to come closer, he wanted to laugh in his ear and feel his hair brushing his forehead and kiss his blushing cheeks.

*Maybe we’ll just stay here, in this room, forever.*

*Make me your hostage, yeah?*

*I’ll do whatever you say.*

*Promise.*

Alfred picked a trail whose end would offer the most beautiful view. It would take them about three hours to get up, three hours to get back. Essentially a full-day endeavor. They got dressed, though Arthur didn’t really have any outfits that fit the occasion—they decided to stop by at an outdoor clothing store to buy something a bit more appropriate. They bought water and sandwiches and snacks and Alfred put them in a backpack that he was to carry.

“Will you be okay? Is it heavy?” Arthur asked.

“Nah, don’t worry about little old me.”

Alfred forced Arthur to have a quick breakfast, because the hike ahead of them required the energy. They sat and they ate at a small

diner, where Arthur had some scrambled eggs and toast. Alfred ate as much as he could, realizing that the night before had left him starving. When they felt that they were completely prepared, they made their way to the start of the trail, near the lake.

“Ready?” Alfred asked. He reached his hand out toward Arthur. Seeing him was always like a rush of adrenaline—he couldn’t believe that someone like Arthur was actually there beside him, was actually smiling at him like that, was seriously reaching out and squeezing his fingers. Had said to him last night, I love you, Alfred.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Arthur sighed. Then, hand-in-hand, they began their trek.

Arthur was quiet, maybe conserving energy or maybe not in a talkative mood, so Alfred talked. He liked to think that he had a pretty good knowledge of plants and trees and animals, and he tried his best to explain the little things to Arthur. Those berries are poisonous, these trees are like hell a old, a fox probably lives in that hole over there. He talked about the hikes he used to take with Matthew when they’d lived together for a bit, and how Matthew had proven himself more of an outdoor adventurer than Alfred.

“Maybe something in the water up in Canada,” Alfred joked.

He didn’t pester Arthur to talk. He knew he was listening, and that when the time came, he would talk. But when Alfred glanced over his shoulder, and he could look at Arthur’s face, he was satisfied with the silence. Arthur’s gaze was constantly moving around him, falling upon the sun-dappled leaves on the trees, the pebbles and sticks at his feet, the birds that flapped above them and the chipmunks that scurried across their paths. He wasn’t smiling, but his expression was mesmerized, astounded by this world that maybe he’d never seen before. He never loosened his grip on Alfred’s hand. Alfred wondered if there was ever an inappropriate time to tell Arthur that he loved him, or if it was just something he could say over and over without it losing its meaning.

They didn’t stop very often on the way up. But, unfortunately, Alfred had not timed this terribly well. When they were deep in the forest, in the middle of the hike and about halfway to the top, they found themselves beneath the highest point of the blistering sun. It rained its heat upon them mercilessly, to the point that Alfred felt he was going to drown in sweat. Arthur moved sluggishly, a few steps behind Alfred, pulled along by the tug of his hand.

“Doing all right?” Alfred asked. “Need a break?”

“Shut up and walk. I wanna get to the top already.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

They took a few breaks to drink from their water bottles and engage more deeply in the surroundings, though neither had brought a camera. Alfred managed to snap a few with his phone. He snuck one of Arthur, leaning against a tree, hair completely awry and cheeks flushed and lips parted with his exhales. The entire path was almost completely uphill. Toward the end, it grew steeper, and the path became riddled with rocks and potentially dangerous ascents.

“Don’t worry,” Alfred encouraged. “I won’t let you fall.”

He said it, and he meant it, and Arthur knew that.

He let Arthur go up ahead of him, so that he could be sure to catch him if he slipped. They clambered over the rocks, grabbing the branches of stray trees and letting their breaths fill the hot air. Alfred didn't speak as much, concentrating his energy on the climb. He savored the sweat pouring down his skin, the ache in his legs, the unsteady beating of his heart. Arthur, though, didn't look too good. He was pale, his eyelids droopy, pausing every few moments to catch his breath. Alfred knew that if he asked him straight out how he was doing, if he needed to take a break, Arthur's pride would speak for him. So he just worked under the assumption that Arthur could collapse at any minute.

"The view will be worth it, I promise," he said.

"I don't think I believe you."

But finally, dirty and sweaty and tired, they reached the top. They emerged on a large, grassy cliff, from which they could see the rolling hills and the lakes and the green, green, green land unfolding before them. The sky was such a bright blue, the sun a golden orb shedding light on it all. They moved to the edge of the cliff. Alfred put his hands on his hips and let an impressed whistle through his puckered lips.

"Would ya look at that," he murmured.

"Beautiful," Arthur agreed.

"Worth it?"

"Yeah."

"What say you to a picnic, milord?"

"Methinks a picnic is a splendid idea."

"Splendiferous."

"Don't use that word, it's silly."

"Let me live my life."

Alfred shed his backpack and spread out a cheap blanket they'd snuck out with them from the inn (he'd apologize to François later) for them to sit on and have their feast. As Alfred began to munch on his sandwich, Arthur leaned his shoulder against his and played some music from his phone, no longer a phone now that he was in the States without a SIM card. He pressed a few buttons and, within moments, a slow guitar song was playing. It had a folksy feel. Alfred liked it. He stretched his legs out and breathed out.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Ben Howard."

"I like it."

More silence. Ben Howard serenading them. Telling them, "No man is an island." The soft, somehow delicate sound of their teeth chewing the sandwiches, chips, little pieces of wrapped up chocolate. Arthur leaned more heavily against Alfred's steady body. He liked the pressure, liked knowing that as he stared out at the frighteningly beautiful view, there was someone like Arthur right next to him—and that that someone loved him, even if the way that they defined love was a little twisted.

Alfred started to talk aimlessly. When he tried to look back on this moment in the future, he would never be able to remember what exactly he talked about. It seemed like it was always like that with Arthur, because the conversation, in the end, didn't really matter. What mattered was Arthur listening to Alfred talk about anything, everything, nothing. They finished their food and sat and just watched, let the sun fall upon them, let the exhaustion of the uphill trek settle in their bones.

As he spoke, though, he felt a change in Arthur's breathing, in the weight of his body. He glanced over and saw that Arthur had fallen asleep, perhaps a slumber induced by the warm rays of the sun. His head was bowed and his position was the same, but his eyes were closed and he was definitely asleep. Alfred smiled, even though nobody could see it. Then he gently wrapped his arms around Arthur's body and then lay down with him on the blanket and decided that a nap was definitely in order. At least for a little bit.

They woke up, Alfred a little later than Arthur, and decided to head back down to the inn to take a shower and lay their heads upon each other's chests and watch the sun set and the stars come out. But

when they started walking, Alfred noticed that Arthur was a bit sluggish. He was dragging his feet a bit, the color of his face paler than seemed normal, eyes lacking luster. Perhaps a hike of this length had been too much for him.

“Are you all right?” Alfred asked as they began down the steep decline. When he reached out to touch Arthur’s arm, Arthur pursed his lips and swatted his hand away.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said. The nap, contrary to what was to be expected of naps, seemed to have soured his mood. Alfred smiled anyway. He went down in front, so that he could catch Arthur if he were to trip or lose his footing. He was surprised by his own willingness to accommodate Arthur’s grumpiness. It didn’t bother him in the slightest.

They walked for about an hour before Arthur collapsed.

Alfred, hating himself for pushing Arthur to do this, figured that Arthur had snuck in a few trips to the bathroom when Alfred hadn’t been paying attention.

“Arthur!”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he repeated, crumpled on the ground, trying to hold himself up on his hands. But his elbows were giving up on him, quaking and quivering and forcing him back to the ground. Alfred crouched beside him. He hated this.

*I hate this, I hate this, I hate this.*

“Just help me up, I can make it down fine,” Arthur insisted.

“Like hell you can.” Alfred wanted to insist that they stay and wait, but he was worried that it would get dark before they could move again. “Come here.”

Alfred gently grasped Arthur’s arms and, despite his protests, pulled him up to his feet. Though, if Alfred had let go, Arthur would have fallen flat again. He ignored every word that Arthur said, for fear that one would manage to convince him, and took his backpack off. He put it over Arthur’s back. Then, still silent, he turned over and grabbed Arthur’s legs and pulled him up onto his back. It was like they’d done in the lake, except now, Arthur’s body felt more limp. Lifeless, without energy. His arms dangled over Alfred’s neck.

“Al, seriously, I—”

“No, I’m carrying you. I’m starving, I want a burger. And a shower.”

“We just ate.”

“Besides, you’re not heavy at all.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Just shut up and let me do this, would you?”

Arthur fell silent. He was so light. It almost felt like the backpack Alfred had been wearing. He loved the feeling of Arthur’s body leaning against his, but hated knowing that it was because Arthur couldn’t walk.

“Sorry, Arthur,” Alfred heard himself say. They’d been walking for about twenty minutes like that. It would be at least another hour and a half before they got back to town.

“For what?”

“Making you do this hike with me.”

“You didn’t make me do anything.”

“I should’ve at least picked an easier one.”

“Stop insulting me.”

“I’m not insulting you. I just know you.”

“No, you don’t.” Arthur leaned his cheek against the back of Alfred’s shoulder. “I don’t think you know me very well at all. And, as a matter of fact, I don’t know you.”

“Well, I at least should’ve known that you couldn’t do this.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“So...you love me, even if you don’t know me?”

“I don’t think loving someone necessarily entails knowing them awfully well.”



“Really? That’s a pretty unique perspective.”

“One that you share, if I’m not mistaken. Otherwise there’s no way you could claim that you love me.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Alfred smiled to himself. He wished that he could fix his glasses, because they were starting to slip down his nose, but he couldn’t let go of Arthur’s legs. They were squeezing his waist ever so slightly.

“I wish Matthew could’ve seen that view.”

“I’m sure he’s seen plenty like that where he’s from.”

“Do you have any siblings?”

“Three younger brothers.”

“Oh.”

“You can imagine how hectic our household was.”

“Yeah. Mine was, too. Just because I liked to cause trouble,” Alfred laughed. He wanted to look back and see if Arthur were smiling, but he couldn’t afford to look away from the trail. He didn’t want to fall.

“Are you two twins?”

“Yup. I’m a minute older, so I’m the leader.”

“Ah.” His breaths fell beautifully upon the back of Alfred’s neck. “Were you the favorite, then?”

“Huh?”

“Among your parents. Were you the favorite? I can’t imagine you were, not after meeting your brother.”

“I resent that,” Alfred grumbled. “And, for the record, I don’t know.”

“I suppose your parents never would admit something like that.”

“No, I just don’t know because I’ve never met my parents.”

Arthur was silent for a moment. Alfred predicted that. It wasn't a topic he felt uncomfortable talking about. It was just a fact about himself that was there, a piece that he'd never felt a real emotion about. Indifference, really. It was better than having known his parents and then lost them.

"But you mentioned to me once that your mother calls you Alfie," Arthur said quietly.

"Oh, yeah. I'm adopted."

"Oh."

"My brother and I lived in foster care for a while. We were adopted when we were twelve."

"By different families? That's barbaric."

"Nah, not really. I think he was meant to live in Canada, and I was meant to live here in the States. We never missed each other, because our parents let us see each other all the time."

Arthur didn't say anything. So Alfred kept talking.

"My adoptive parents are amazing. They really are—especially for being able to put up with me. Guess I was the troublemaker at our foster home. I was always pulling pranks on everyone, organizing play riots, running away when I was feeling particularly rebellious. Mattie was always there, so it was fine, but..."

"Were you happy there?"

"I don't know if happy is the right word. I didn't want for anything. I had friends, my brother, food on the table. I can't really explain why I somehow grew up loving to punch things as hard as I can."

"I don't think anyone could. Seems like something more subconscious."

"It always felt weird not having parents until I was twelve. I had a kind of makeshift family, but I think I'm still a little fucked up."

"I don't think so."

"Really? Even though I beat the shit out of people for a living?"

“Even so. If you’re a little fucked up, then I’m certifiably insane.”

“When I was sixteen, I got into a fight in an alley. My punches were pretty mean, even then. It just happened that the alley was right behind Coach’s gym, and he decided to bring me up as his prodigy child.”

“The stars were aligned.”

“Exactly.”

“Did you know anything about fighting?”

“Not professional fighting, no. I didn’t even know who Coach was. When I figured out he’s one of the most famous MMA fighters of all time, I flipped.”

“Are you the first person he trained?”

“Like, the first person he coached personally? I don’t know. Every time I ask, he avoids the question. But I don’t think so.”

“Oh.”

They were silent for some minutes. Alfred couldn’t remember the last time he’d talked to someone about his past. It felt nice, even if there really wasn’t anything to get off his chest.

“What was your childhood like, Arthur?”

“Well, let’s see. I was the oldest of four boys, so the world was expected of me. But I was also born to disgustingly rich parents and spoiled, though perhaps not in the way my brothers were. I took the brunt of my parents’ wrath, especially since it seemed I could never meet their expectations. I was the oldest, with the most responsibility, but also the most disliked, I suppose.”

“Seriously? But you seem perfect.”

“That’s kind of you, but no. Even after years at Eton, the best place to take perfectly normal children and mold them into cheeky little politicians, I was still a disappointment. Rather hated by my brothers, one of whom now refuses to speak to me. My parents only speak to me sparingly, when they need money or want to congratulate me on a recent shoot. Though, actually, they talk to me more now than they ever did when I was a kid.”

“Sounds like they’re taking advantage of you.”

“My, seems like you have some sound deductive skills after all,” Arthur sighed. “Yes, I had the stereotypical neglectful and emotionally abusive rich childhood. And now that I have money myself they’ve learned to feign pride, while the rest of my kin despise me.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not. If I’m being fair, I was quite a snotty little bugger.”

“I don’t think that means you deserved that kind of childhood.”

“It’s fine. I probably would have turned out this vain and pretentious anyway. I’m British, after all.”

“Did your parents ever call you fat?”

“Why the hell would you ask that?”

“Just wondering.”

“You’re trying to be a psychologist now, are you?”

“Yup.”

“For the record, yes, they did. They got me into modeling in the first place. Said that I had the face for it and could do it to make them proud. A load of bollocks, really.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Fuck off, Yank.”

Alfred smiled and leaned down and kissed Arthur’s fingers, clasped there against his chest. He felt Arthur’s hair against his skin, his legs squeezing him, the warmth of his exhales and the vibrations of his voice. Even if he was talking about shitty things his parents did, his voice felt nice like that.

“Thank you for bringing me on this hike with you, Al,” he said. “I really am glad.”

“Really? Even now?”

“Even now. How do you know that I’m not faking the whole

thing to get you to carry me?”

“I mean, you could’ve just asked me. I’ll always carry you if you want me to.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Arthur tightened his grip and then put his lips to Alfred’s salty, sweaty skin. It felt like home.

“I like watching your muscles when you move,” he said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“You’re like a movie star.”

“No, not like you.”

“Maybe they should’ve cast you as Captain America.”

“That would be fucking amazing.”

“What with all your America themed boxers, you’d fit the part perfectly.”

“Oh, you like my boxers?”

“I love your boxers.”

They walked down the mountain. Alfred laughed while Arthur whispered in his ear, sensual words in his honey British accent, and held onto his back. By the time they made it back down they were exhausted, sweating, and eager for each other. They wanted to say ‘I love you’ in hushed tones that only they could hear while they bathed in twilight and Ben Howard. They wanted to convince themselves, just by one another’s touch, that they had been lovers their entire lives. Even though it seemed like it had been such a short time, they needed this, to reassure themselves. Yes, I love him, they needed to know it, needed to constantly remind themselves.

So they went back to the inn and did that.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## 16

Arthur decided that this was when Alfred looked his absolute best.

Lying on the floor of the room, leaning his feet up against the door that led out to the balcony. Orange and red and purple rays from the sun falling upon his frame, lighting up his skin like a shadowed rainbow. His tan lines sharp and absolutely hilarious. A Yankees baseball cap sitting crooked on his head, a lollipop in his lips and an unfinished bottle of coke beside him. Wearing his boxers and his bronze skin, staring vacantly up at the ceiling. Fingers tangled up absentmindedly in Arthur's hair as he leaned his head on his stomach and watched the details of his face. When he couldn't see Arthur watching him, but could perhaps feel his gaze. While they lay tired and warm from love. This was when Alfred looked his best. Arthur couldn't tear his eyes away. He wanted to reach up and drink from that bottle of coke, lick the lollipop, steal away Alfred's hat and put it on his own to feel like they could share it together. He reached his arm out and grabbed Alfred's other hand, the one that wasn't lost in Arthur's hair, and he fit their fingers together.

"How many people do you think have stayed in this room before?" Alfred asked. His voice was low, sluggish, words slightly slurred. It moved through the room like a butterfly new to the world of flying.

"I don't know. Depends how long that frog has been maintaining this place."

"Probably hundreds. Thousands. Millions."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"It's such a nice room to stay in. It has an awesome view of the sunset and the lake..."

"Yeah."

He liked the way that Alfred's stomach vibrated against his cheek when he spoke. It was soft and warm and soothing. He could have

fallen asleep, if only he wasn't so desperate to keep looking at Alfred.

"Do you think people have had sex in that bed before?" Alfred said.

"Probably."

"Men? Women? Both?"

"Both."

"That's kind of a weird feeling."

"What is?"

"Having sex in the same bed as them."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It feels like we shared something really intimate with them. Like if we ever met, we'd feel really close."

"You're proper weird."

"You always say that."

"Because it's true."

"Not so weird that you won't fuck me, though."

"Hell, of course I'll fuck you. You're a marvelous fuck."

"Did you always know you were gay?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"I never actually thought about it. But I think I did know. It was just a part of me, something I didn't focus on but something that existed within me."

"You never actually thought about your own sexual orientation?"

"I never thought about anything sexual until I met François."

"Whoa, really?"

“Yes. He was my first lover.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.” Arthur loved the way that Alfred was stroking his hair. In a rhythm, combing through his tangles with those calloused thumbs, those calloused index fingers, those calloused palms. Grasping his fingers, Arthur smiled. Alfred was always full of energy, always running around, always loud. The twilight seemed to make him tired. He blinked slowly up at the ceiling, didn’t fix his hat when it started to slip off, could hardly squeeze Arthur’s fingers back. He was moving so innocently, so beautifully.

“What about after him?”

“As I broke into the modeling industry, you can imagine the access I had.”

“To beautiful people, you mean.”

“Right. I never did find myself attracted to any of the women.”

“So you just figured you were gay.”

“Like I said, I never thought about it. That’s not how I think about it.”

“How, then?”

“I fall in love with a person, not their genitals or gender identity.”

“That’s nice, I guess. Is it always love? Never just a fling?”

Arthur shrugged.

“I’ve had a few. But I don’t like it.”

“Oh.”

“What about you?”

“I think I just like everybody.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t just like dudes and I don’t just like chicks.”



“You like flings, I’m guessing.”

“Usually,” Alfred said quietly. Then he squeezed Arthur’s hand and, though he didn’t look at him, Arthur could see the smile on his wet, happy lips. “Not really anymore.”

“No?”

“Nope. Besides, you’re by far my hottest catch ever.”

“You can write my name down in your journal and put a star next to it.”

“When did you fall in love with me?”

“Huh?”

“Like, at what moment did you decide that you loved me? Whatever the hell that means.”

“I don’t think there was a specific moment. Oh, maybe when we snuck out of the hospital.”

“I realized that I was in love with you when I saw you crying. Remember?”

“I try not to.”

“I hated it so much, and I wanted to stop it so badly, I figured it must have been love.”

“Reasonable conclusion.”

“I love you, Arthur.”

“Prove it.”

“I’ll give you my lollipop.”

“I’m sold.”

Arthur reached up and grabbed the lollipop straight from Alfred’s lips. He put it into his mouth and closed his eyes and just felt Alfred’s skin. Listened to the quiet rumblings of his stomach, wondered why they had decided to come to the floor instead of the bed. Sheets too messy? Too hot? Too comfortable, maybe? The floor hurt his back a little bit. It gave him a reason to move closer to Alfred, maybe. Or

maybe they just wanted to be strange and lay on the floor, listening to Ben Howard and sucking on lollipops and each other's fingers.

"Will you be there when the day's done, will you be there," he sang, "under the same sun?"

"How did we get here, Al?"

"Beats me."

"I should be in London."

"I should be in the Big Apple."

"We probably shouldn't be together."

"But we are."

"I love you. But saying it sounds strange."

"That's okay. Maybe if you say it enough times, it'll stop sounding strange."

"Won't it lose its meaning?"

"I don't think so. There are different ways to say I love you, anyway."

"Are there?"

"Yeah. Like, you look beautiful when you wake up in the morning."

"Text me when you get home."

"Can I brush your hair?"

"Here, have a cigarette."

"Sneak out of this hospital with me."

"Let's drive forever."

"Your accent sounds like a symphony."

"I want to steal your boxers from you."

"Don't let go."

“Be safe.”

They were laughing now. Quiet, exhausted chuckles that stole the last of their energy. Arthur was almost finished with the lollipop, his mind spinning and dizzy with the endless ways that he loved this boy.

“Do I actually look beautiful when I wake up in the morning?” he heard himself ask.

“Like God.”

“You know what God looks like?”

“You.”

Alfred’s breathing was becoming slower, steadier, his voice drifting like a distant song.

“Are you falling asleep?”

“Do you not want me to?”

“Should we go to bed?”

“No. I like it here. I can hear the music better.”

“Yeah?”

“I want to know what it feels like to wake up with you in my arms on the floor.”

“You’re so strange.”

“Mhmm.”

Arthur relented because, inexplicably, he felt the same. The music did sound much better from the floor. He lifted his head from Alfred’s stomach and crawled up to him. He took the lollipop from his lips and stuck it into the opening of the coke bottle, and then he buried his face in Alfred’s sweet, warm neck. Draped his arm over Alfred’s chest and pressed his legs to his.

“We should get the blanket, though. Otherwise you’ll get sick,” Alfred whispered.

“Mm.”

He reached up and pulled the blanket from the bed without moving. He put it over them, then he turned his face and kissed Arthur's forehead. Didn't move his lips away. Wrapped his arm around Arthur's curled-up body and began to fall asleep.

"Take off your glasses, love."

"Right."

They drifted off together.

"Lovely as you are," Ben Howard sang. "Lovely as you are, lovely as you are."

In the middle of the night, sometime between two and four o'clock, Arthur woke up, as he sometimes did. His habits told him to get up and go to the bathroom—get rid of that lollipop, fatass—but he couldn't move his limbs. He didn't have the energy to get up from the floor. And he felt cold. He realized that Alfred was no longer holding him, perhaps distanced by the natural tosses and turns of slumber. He still didn't like it. In the darkness, encased by the soft music that was still playing, he clambered for his companion, his partner, his lover, eager to feel his arms encasing him. When he finally made his way back to Alfred, sprawled on the floor and whimpering quietly in his sleep, he noticed something awfully strange. They'd forgotten to draw the blinds, so moonlight was seeping in through the darkness. In the silvery light, he saw tears glistening on Alfred's cheeks. But Alfred was, definitely, asleep. Arthur felt a tug in his stomach, a jump in his heart, as he watched those innocent tears run down those innocent cheeks.

"What are you dreaming about, love?" he murmured against Alfred's neck. "Must be a nightmare."

He leaned down and kissed away each of the tears.

"It's all right," he continued. He curled up against Alfred's chest and kissed his shoulder and took his silent heat. "We all have nightmares."

As if Alfred could hear Arthur's voice in his dreams, he turned over

and wrapped both arms around Arthur's delicate body, held him tightly against his chest, let his lips be crushed by Arthur's forehead.

"Just remember that I'm here, even if you can't see me."

Arthur held on tightly and concentrated as hard as he could on the beating of Alfred's heart. Like a clock, a ticking time bomb, waves crashing against the side of a cliff. An entire world exploding and being reborn in an instant, that was Alfred's heart.

"You can hold me through all your nightmares."

He smelled like happiness and summer nights and strawberry-flavored lollipops.

"I can't promise that I won't have my own, though. I hope we don't have these awful nightmares at the same time—we won't be able to help each other, then."

He fell asleep wondering if Alfred had ever held him like this, while he was asleep, and whispered to him that he loved him when he couldn't hear it.

"I love you."

*I love you.*

They spent the next day back at the lake, Alfred swimming freely while Arthur clung to him for dear life. They were comfortable and felt no burdens on their backs except for the same baggage they always carried with them; there was nobody else to pester them. They were alone with each other and happy and they smiled as if the world was ending and they had no choice but to smile.

"Your teeth are crooked," Alfred said at one point.

"You just think that because you're American."

"And you have a gap between your two front teeth."

"You have a few gaps in your brain."

"Aw, c'mon, you know I think you're beautiful."

François and Antonio invited them to have lunch together, at a nice restaurant ten minutes away from the inn. They joined them, despite Arthur's half-hearted protests, and their conversation was lively and romantic. They spoke of the magnificence of the lake, of how they'd built this inn together, of all the people they'd seen coming in and out of this town. François tried to bring up the past, tried to tell nostalgic stories of his time frolicking about London with Arthur, but Arthur wouldn't humor him. Underneath the table, while he used his other hand to smoke a cigarette, Arthur brushed Alfred's fingers. They teased each other, brushed their legs together, held their laughter back. They spent the afternoon walking through the town, picking up Alfred's car from the repair shop and driving it back to the inn, gravitated back toward the lake to watch the sun set upon the waters while Arthur sat on the dock and Alfred tugged on his legs in the water, popped into the boutiques and antique stores that dotted this place.

"This tie brings out your eyes," Arthur said, holding a blue tie up to Alfred's chest.

"Oh yeah?"

Alfred struck a pose, hand to his chin, gaze turned upward, lips unnecessarily puckered.

"How's this, Mr. Fancy Model?"

"Come off it, wanker."

They held hands while they walked. They didn't much care for what other people were thinking—Arthur certainly didn't. He'd been in the spotlight enough times to know that caring about what others thought was hardly productive. He was a staunch believer that your perception of yourself is what defines you.

At dinner, Alfred and Arthur fought.

They'd had arguments before—casual, fleeting arguments that mattered little or not at all—but never a fight. This was a fight.

It started when Alfred asked Arthur why he wasn't eating. They had decided to have dinner in their room again, since they were tired and reluctant to spend much more money. Chinese take-out, something Arthur had assured Alfred they also had in London.

"Plenty of it," he'd added.

But now they were sitting at the table on the balcony, Alfred nearly finished with his second plate, and Arthur had been picking at his meal without making much progress.

“Hey,” Alfred said, voice muffled, “aren’t you going to eat?”

“No. I’m not hungry. Maybe if I get peckish later...”

“But you haven’t eaten since lunch. You have to be hungry.”

“I don’t *have* to be anything. I’m just not hungry, all right?” Somehow, Alfred’s oblivious but demanding tone of voice irritated him. He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. Alfred stared at him, swallowed his mouthful, and put his chopsticks down.

“Just have a little bit. I walked all the way down to the store to get it,” he insisted. Arthur sighed out the smoke in his lungs.

“Sorry, *princess*, but I’m really not hungry.”

To prove his point, in admittedly the most immature way possible, Arthur held his cigarette in one hand and pushed away his plate with the other. Like a child disobeying its mother.

“Wow,” Alfred grumbled. “You don’t have to be so ungrateful.”

Arthur hated that word. Almost more than anything.

“And just what do you know about grateful? Don’t pull that bollocks on me.”

“All I’m saying is that you could be a bit more appreciative. Or you could’ve told me that you weren’t hungry, and I—”

“You wouldn’t have bothered getting me anything,” Arthur interrupted. “I’m sorry that I’ve put such a damper on your night.”

“Arthur, come on.”

“Come on what.”

“Don’t be like this. You don’t have to pretend that you’re not hungry for me. You know that I—”

“It’s funny. Are all Americans like this?”

“Like what?”

“Do you all think that the world just revolves around you? It’s not about you, Alfred. I’m sorry that I made you walk all the way out to the Chinese restaurant. I’m sorry that I’m such an unappreciative bastard. But I’m not pretending not to be hungry for you, because I couldn’t give less of a fuck about what you think. I’m just not bloody hungry.”

His voice had grown louder than he’d meant. Alfred stared at him, eyes wide behind those thin, square glasses. As if he’d just been slapped in the face. Arthur stood up from the table, pushing his chair back with a screech, and took another drag from his cigarette.

“You think that just because I said I love you a few times, it means every fucking thing I do is for you? Please, Alfred, don’t flatter yourself.”

“Arthur.”

“Just eat it all yourself, I’m not going to have any.”

Arthur thought that was the end. He was going to hurt Alfred, he was going to go inside and finish his smoke, he was going to go to bed and in the middle of the night when he was horny and starved for love, he would apologize.

That wasn’t at all what happened.

“Hey!” Alfred stood up from the table, too. His chair was even louder than Arthur’s had been. Arthur turned around to face him. “What the hell is your problem?”

“My problem? You’re the one with the problem, thinking everything is about you.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. Why can’t you just accept that I’m worried about you and take my advice?”

“You can be as worried as you want, it doesn’t make a difference to me.”

“So you don’t care at all what I think?”

“No. I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

“Now you’re just straight up lying. You so care what people think.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”



“I know that you care way too fucking much.”

“What?”

“That’s all you ever do is concentrate on what other people think! It’s why you ended up in the hospital in the first place, isn’t it?”

Alfred might as well have driven a stake straight through Arthur’s heart. It cut through him, made every part of his body explode in fiery pain. His eyesight became blurry and he felt dizzy. Sad, angry, depressed, furious, a whirlwind of every terrible feeling he’d ever had. He turned away, unable to look at Alfred’s angry, scrunched-up face for another moment. He wanted to throw up—really throw up.

“Fuck, Arthur, I’m sorry...”

“At least I’m actually honest with myself!” Arthur cried. He’d let anger get the best of him. Out of every emotion, anger was the one that won. Hurt and anger. “I didn’t end up in the hospital because of some fucked up dream I had like you did.”

Alfred blinked, cut off in the middle of his apology. Arthur regretted saying it, but all he could see now was red.

“I know my limits. I don’t have any delusions about being some big champion, or whatever the fuck it is you’re always on about.”

*Stop, Arthur.*

*That’s enough.*

“If anyone cares about what other people think, it’s you!”

“Like you know anything about my dreams! You just think about yourself, holed up in your stupid bathroom with your stupid chocolates and your stupid cigarettes.”

As Alfred yelled, Arthur stormed back inside. He was headed for the bathroom. To be alone there with his chocolates and his cigarettes.

“See? Just like that! All the time!”

“You should be glad to get me out of your hair, since all I do is spit on your graces and throw up in your bathrooms.”

Arthur should’ve known that Alfred’s temper was like this. It fit in well with the rest of his volatile, passionate personality. He slammed

the door behind him and sat down on the floor and hugged his knees to his chest. He lit another cigarette. He could hear Alfred's heavy footsteps outside.

“Arthur!” Alfred banged on the door.

“Fuck off, cunt. You have your precious punching bags to keep you company, don't you?”

“Fine! Just rot in there for all I care.”

Arthur began to sob when he heard the door slam. There was hardly even anything in his stomach to throw up.

Chapter End Notes

i hate this chapter

except for dat title drop

\*throws confetti\*

With every step, with every breath he took, with every single blink, Alfred hated himself more and more. His world was spinning but he couldn't stop fuming, seething, his body moving off instinct. He needed to get away from this place, these people, to find himself somewhere in the chaos of this raging monster he had become. Muttering under his breath, sweating, clenching his fists, he grabbed the keys to his car and stepped into his sneakers and left the room. He didn't pause to say hello to Antonio, working at the counter, when he got down to the lobby. He just went outside to the parking lot, got into his car, turned up the Eminem album as loud as it would go, and began to drive.

He didn't know where he was going. He just needed to get away from the inn, from the words that Arthur had screamed swirling around his head (and the words with which he had so stupidly retorted). The sun was almost completely gone now, the stars began to come out and he could see an outline of the full moon. He took random turns, felt the steering wheel pressed against his palms, hoped in the back of his mind that he wouldn't get so lost that he couldn't find his way back.

Because when he calmed down, he knew, he would definitely go back.

To what, he wasn't certain.

Somehow, as the last bit of light disappeared from the sky, he found himself on the highway. As much as he'd tried drowning everything out with the music, the sound of the car's wheels rolling along the streets, the words were still there. Arthur's daggers cutting through him like butter, while the awful things that Alfred himself had said still left a taste like acid on his dry tongue. How could he have said something like that? Even if Arthur had been difficult, frustrating, uselessly irritable and straight up mean, Alfred had said unforgivable things. Awful things that he had known would really hurt Arthur. He had *known*. And he'd said them anyway. And still, in the midst of his blinding regret, he felt such anger. How could Arthur treat him like that, anyway? Like he was just some pest, someone he could toy with and beat up whenever he felt a tad bit low?

*That's not fair. I'm not being fair.*

*But neither is he!*

As Alfred grit his teeth and tapped his fingers incessantly against the steering wheel, he realized that he was starting to swerve, to absentmindedly drift into other lanes. The road in front of him was blurring, his brain was fogging up with remorse and anger and I-don't-even-know, so he pulled over. He just pulled over to the side of the road and put his emergency lights on so that people knew he was there and he leaned his forehead against the wheel. He listened to the sound of his struggling breaths. Banged his head gently, over and over and over. A little harder each time. The car swayed a bit with every fast car that drove past. He wondered where he was.

“Fuck,” he said to himself. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

He needed to find himself somewhere in the racket, the voices in his mind. He brought his legs to his chest and curled up in the driver's seat of his car and he pressed his face to his thighs so that there was nothing but darkness. He saw Arthur's face, tears on his cheeks and a flash of betrayal in his green, green eyes. Saw his lower lip quiver, even as he spat out his nasty responses. Saw behind the façade of toughness, sarcasm, and dryness someone who was broken. Alfred had broken him even more, hadn't he? In the middle of trying to put him back together, Alfred had gotten frustrated with his own broken parts and just thrown Arthur's pieces to the ground and watched them shatter.

He was crumbling now, too. It was so painful. He wanted so badly to put Arthur back together, but how could he do that when there were missing pieces? When some of the pieces, no matter how hard Alfred tried, just weren't fitting? He put so many different types of glue, tried to fit them at different angles, but nothing was working. It was like Arthur didn't want to be fixed.

*That can't be it. Of course not.*

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Alfred knew that Arthur hadn't meant what he'd said—just as Alfred hadn't meant what he'd said. The insults had rained from his tongue in a moment of heat and chaos, not a situation where he could've meant something like that. There was no way, Alfred told himself, Arthur could truly think so little of Alfred's dreams. Just like Alfred didn't believe for a second that Arthur being in the hospital was

his fault.

*Of course it's not his fault, of course it's not because he's vain, of course not.*

*And...I'm not delusional...right?*

Alfred put his fingers in his hair and he tugged a bit. Just to feel the pressure in his pounding scalp. He couldn't remember feeling this terrible; perhaps when he'd woken up in the hospital room and groped for Coach's hand, he'd felt this lost. This terrible, sinking feeling, of not knowing which was up and which was down and which way he should've been swimming to break the surface.

There were a lot of things that Alfred didn't know, especially about Arthur. But there was one thing that he did know.

He loved Arthur. He loved him so much that just the idea that they'd had a fight, said such terrible and mean-spirited things, made him feel queasy. Even now, after what had happened, he couldn't convince himself that he didn't love Arthur, and that there wasn't anything he would do to let Arthur know that. Being away from him, cooling down on the side of this highway in his Thunderbird, had helped him clear his head. The only thing he'd found there in the muck was: I love Arthur.

Alfred swallowed his pride and decided to go back to the inn.

But when he got to the lobby, a small plastic bag in his hand from the stores he'd stopped by, he couldn't do it. Not pride, not anger, but fear and shame burrowed itself into his chest and suffocated him. He couldn't face Arthur—beautiful, witty, fantastic Arthur, whom he'd insulted so horribly. He couldn't do it. He hated himself at that moment too much to convince himself that he even deserved to talk to Arthur. He sat down on a chair in the lobby and stared at the wall. Watching paint dry. Wondering if he'd ever be able to find the words to even tell Arthur that he was sorry.

"Ah, Alfie. I thought that was you," came a smooth, familiar voice. It was François. He smiled and sat down in the chair across from Alfred's. "What are you doing down here all by your cute lonesome? It's a bit late, *chéri*."

"Yeah, I just..." Alfred wasn't sure if it was a good idea to divulge the details of what had happened to François. "I don't really wanna go back up to my room right now."

François, like a painting, crossed one leg over the other and leaned back in his chair. Did all of the French move like that, Alfred wondered?

“Is everything all right?”

“No, not really.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But I’m rather good at giving advice, if I do say so myself,” he winked. Alfred smiled, but it was a small, half-hearted smile. He started fidgeting with the plastic bag, feeling restless.

“I think I just figured out how terrible of a person I am,” he said quietly.

“Oh?”

“Arthur and I got into a fight.”

“Ah.” François must have been a veteran to this. He ran his long fingers through his hair, brushed it away from his face, and leaned his cheek softly against his palm. He smiled at Alfred as if he knew a deep, dark secret, with a knowing and mischievous glint in his eyes.

“We weren’t really fighting about anything specific. We just got mad and decided to dig at each other. You know?”

“*Bien sûr.*”

“Of course you know. You dated him before.”

“So you *are* sleeping together.”

“Obviously.”

“Not to me...”

“You’re not a very good liar.”

“Neither are you.”

Alfred chuckled. François just kept smiling.

“I never knew I was this horrible inside. Like, way inside.”

“We’re all horrible way inside. That’s what it means to be ‘way

inside,' as you say. It's where you put the unsightly parts of yourself that even you want to forget."

"I don't want any part of me to be as terrible as that person I was up there in that room."

"*C'est ce que nous sommes, Alfie.*" François shrugged his slender shoulders. "Being human means being horrible in some aspect or another. It is part of our makeup, part of the way that we were crafted. We learn, we tell ourselves what it means to be 'horrible' and we try to shut those parts away. But they are there. And sometimes they come out."

"Yeah, well I should control mine better."

"Perhaps," François smiled, "but at the very least you are not alone in having your ugly traits."

Alfred thought of the things Arthur had said to him and the vindictive look in his eyes.

"I hope I never have to see that part of me ever again," he murmured.

"Arthur probably feels the same. But it will always come out at one point or another. *C'est ce que nous sommes.*"

"Even if you love someone? That doesn't make sense."

"Oh, are we talking about love now?" François raised his eyebrows like a gossiping grandmother. He feigned surprise, puckered his lips, but somehow it seemed like he had known the whole time.

"I don't really know, dude. I don't know."

"If it's love you're talking about, then don't bother with hiding the ugly," he said. Alfred blinked at him in silence. "Part of the definition of love is knowing that someone has those horrible, ugly parts in them, and choosing to love them anyway. Can you really even love someone if you haven't seen every side of them?"

"I don't know," Alfred sighed. "I mean, it's one thing to have a few character flaws. But it's another thing to act as horribly as I did. Another thing entirely."

"I'm not so convinced."

“Maybe you’re just more optimistic than I am.”

“I don’t think anyone is more optimistic than you are, *mon choupinou*.”

“So you think that insulting someone, and calling them out for the things that you know they’re insecure about, is just a natural part of being in love?”

“Let me ask you something. When Arthur calls you names, or yells at you, or insults you, what do you feel?”

“I dunno. Anger. Pain, I guess.”

“Do you hate him?”

“No,” Alfred said. Without hesitation.

“Not even for the second that he’s telling you off?”

“No. Of course I don’t hate him...”

“Anger and pain and shame—these things that come with the ugly parts of ourselves, are temporary. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“That depends, I think.”

“Knowing Arthur, he’s probably thrown more than a few choice words at you,” François smirked. “Did you ever once feel that you no longer wanted to be with him?”

“...No.”

“See what I mean?”

“I guess.”

“Like when you first wake up in the morning. You can’t stand the rays of light from the sun. They’re irritating and blinding, and you wish that they hadn’t woken you up. But after a while, you remember that you love the sun. You love its warmth and its light despite the fact that it wakes you up in the morning when you’re tired.”

“That’s a really weird metaphor.”

“Best I could come up with on the spot, I’m afraid,” François laughed. “At least makes sense, I’m sure.”



“Yeah.”

“Do you love the sun?”

“Sure.”

“Even while it’s waking you up in the morning? That doesn’t make you love it any less, does it?”

“No...”

“Think of Arthur like your sun. And you are his. That’s why it’s okay for you to be horrible people to each other every once in a while. As painful as it may be, and as much as you wish you could control it, it’s who you are.”

“I don’t think I believe that. I think I can control it if I try hard enough.”

“Believe what you want, *chéri*. Honestly, I probably just like to hear myself talk.”

“Me, too.”

They exchanged their smiles, at ease and natural with one another. Speaking with François had soothed Alfred’s nerves and pushed away the last bit of shame hanging in his mind. He grabbed the plastic bag and stood up, very confident now in his love for Arthur Kirkland.

“Thanks for the advice, Pops. I appreciate it.”

“P...Pops...?”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“*A demain.*”

Alfred pushed aside the hatred he felt for himself and the hatred he felt for Arthur because that wasn’t important. The most important thing in his mind right now was reminding Arthur, convincing Arthur, reassuring Arthur, that Alfred loved him. It was the only thing that mattered.

He decided to knock on the door before he went in. He knocked gently, but not timidly. He knocked with conviction.

“Arthur?” he said, knowing there would be no answer. “Arthur, I’m

coming inside.”

There was a worry tugging on him, pulling him back, saying that Arthur would react to him with a punch in the face or another line of heart-slicing insults. But he opened the door and he went inside anyway. Arthur hadn't closed the blinds, even though it was dark out. The moon cast silver, eerie shadows across the room. It took Alfred's eyes a few moments to adjust, while he stepped in and closed the door behind him. He saw the silhouette of Arthur's fragile body, curled up on the bed, his back facing the door. His breaths weren't steady enough for him to be asleep. Alfred hadn't expected him to be asleep at all.

“Hi, Arthur,” he said. Arthur didn't respond or move. Alfred could imagine the expression on his face—eyelids drooping over bloodshot eyes, dry from tears. Pale complexion, dry lips, a deceiving demeanor of apathy. Alfred didn't bother turning the lights on. He just slipped out of his shoes and moved to the bed. Careful not to rock it too much, for fear of causing Arthur any more discomfort, he sat down upon it as tenderly as he could. Crossed his legs and put the plastic bag in his lap.

“Uh, I brought you some stuff while I was out,” he said. Nerves evident in his trembling voice. “Got you some chocolate. Probably not as good as what you usually eat since it's American. I know you don't like American chocolate. I tried to get something you might like, though.”

He took out the block of Toblerone and put it in the small space between them.

“And I noticed that you're almost out of tea so I got you some Earl Grey.”

He took out the box of tea bags and put it beside the Toblerone.

“Oh, and I got you these cigarettes. The Benson & Hedges ones that you like—at least, I think they're the ones that you like. I had to go to a few stores to find them, but I've never seen you smoke anything else so I went ahead and bought them.”

He took out the carton of cigarettes.

Arthur still hadn't moved or said anything. As Alfred spoke, he came back to himself. So he forced himself to keep speaking.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me just cuz I bought you some stuff,” he began. “But I am sorry, Arthur. So, so sorry. I shouldn’t have said any of those things. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean any of it.”

Arthur stirred a bit. As if the scent of chocolate had revived him.

“That probably sounds like a load of bullshit. But I...I don’t really know what else to do except say I’m sorry until you believe me. But you don’t have to if you don’t want to. I probably wouldn’t forgive me if I were you. I would hate me. Actually, I *do* hate me. Oh, uh, sorry. Guess I’m talking about myself again.”

His voice, even though he was speaking in rushed, quiet murmurs, sounded too loud in this darkness. He looked out and saw the lake and it somehow looked even more beautiful now than it had any other night. He didn’t think that was fair.

“This probably doesn’t sound very convincing after the awful things I said to you,” Alfred continued, “but I love you. Whatever the fuck that word even means—I really, really love you. You didn’t deserve what I did to you. No matter what you said, or did, nobody deserves that. I took your secrets, you know, the stuff that you confided in me, and I just spit them back in your face. And it wasn’t fair. You don’t do that to someone you love. But I’m convinced that I love you. There’s no other way to describe this. Even when I was so pissed off my head hurt, driving all over the damn place, the only thing I could think of was how much I love you.”

Finally, Arthur spoke. Alfred’s words had gotten through.

“Toblerone isn’t American. It’s Swiss.”

“Oh. Good, I guess.”

“And don’t apologize to me anymore,” he said in his raspy, cracked, tired voice. “You were right, after all. Everything you said was right.”

“Wait...”

“About being ungrateful. About closing myself off from other people. Thinking too much about what others think. Everything—about the chocolate and the cigarettes. You were right about it all.”

“Hey, hold on a sec—”

“So you don’t have to be sorry. I should be apologizing to you, for dragging you into my fucked up life. It’d probably be better for you if you just left, then you wouldn’t have to deal with it anymore. You said it yourself. I only think about myself. I’m too involved in my own head, looking in mirrors and locking myself in bathrooms, to be anything to you.”

“That’s not true.”

“Whatever this is, I don’t think it’s love. I think we’re both a little messed up, and we managed to convince ourselves that we loved each other because we shared a sad hospital room with each other.”

“Stop it.”

“I’m probably better off being stuck in my head without anyone bothering me, or me bothering anyone else. And you’re probably better off without someone who disregards your dreams the way I do. You’re right about everything, Al. Not a single word you said was wrong.”

Alfred saw Arthur breaking right in front him. He saw it and cut to his core, the jagged edges of those shattered pieces digging into his heart and making his entire body flare up. Making his chest ache. Burn. He put his hand against it and could hardly feel his own heartbeat.

*I did this, didn’t I?*

“It’s not your fault I’m like this,” Arthur said, as if reading Alfred’s mind. “I’ve been like this the whole time. I’m sorry that I ever told you that I loved you. It was stupid and selfish of me to lead you on like that.”

“Hey, come on...”

Alfred’s voice didn’t sound like his own.

“You’re a beautiful, wonderful person, and you should leave right now,” Arthur whispered. “Go train and make yourself strong. Go fight the bastard that took your sight from you, go be the champion of the world because that’s what you deserve.”

“Arthur, please—”

“I’m really sorry for wasting your time. I’m sorry for leaving the

hospital with you. I'm sorry for making you think that you loved me."

"I...I do love you."

"It's okay. You can stop now. I'm fine, really. I don't need you to keep saying it."

"I'm not saying it to please you."

"Then you're just deluding yourself."

"No, I'm not. I love you."

"Al..."

"I love you."

Alfred's voice cracked and he realized that he was crying. There were tears rolling down his cheeks, unstoppable and heavy. He hated himself for doing this to Arthur—and he hated that no matter what he was saying, no matter how much he was trying to fix Arthur, there was no way it was going to work unless Arthur opened his eyes and wanted to get better for him. Not for Alfred, not for Kiku, not for his photographers or his parents, but for him. Otherwise he would stay forever in that bathroom, choking and falling into pieces.

“I loved you from the moment I saw you in that wheelchair. You were an angel to me, in that hospital. I loved you when I saw you smoke that first cigarette, after you covered the smoke alarm. I loved you with my entire soul for every moment. Every single fucking moment, Arthur, every single one. And when I kissed you for the first time it felt like paradise, like I didn’t need to be a good person anymore because I already knew what heaven felt like. I could just die and go to hell and it would be okay because I’d kissed you, I’d fucking kissed you.”

His words were practically incoherent through his sobs, but he couldn’t stop talking. He clumsily took his glasses off and he pushed away the gifts he’d gotten and he lay down and he put his arms around Arthur and he buried his face in the back of Arthur’s neck. A place to put his tears.

“The other day, when we decided to sleep on the floor,” Alfred murmured, “I didn’t think it was real. I thought, what the fuck is going on? This can’t be real, right? It’s not possible to be this fucking happy. It’s not possible to feel like this toward another person. To want to hold you so tightly that the shape of your body changes, and you can ever only fit in my arms for the rest of your life. To want to kiss you so hard that your lips start to taste like mine. I wanted to smell like you for the rest of my life. I still want to.”

“Please don’t cry, Al.”

“I don’t think what we have is normal, and I don’t care. Maybe we became too much too soon. But I don’t care, I really don’t care. I just love you. And I want you to get better because you’ll be so much happier.”

“I don’t think I’m going to get better.”

“I think you will. But not for me. Not because I lost my temper and said something stupid, or because some random photographer threw an offhand comment about your weight.”

He paused to cry for a little bit.

“I want you to be happy because you know you *deserve* to be happy. Do you believe that, Arthur? Do you believe that you deserve to be happy?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“You do. Look at how happy you made me—it’s not possible for someone like that to not deserve every amazing thing in the world. You made me happy when I thought I would be sad for the rest of my life.”

“You’re overreacting now.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’re making my skin wet.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because you’re not happy.”

“Fucking hell, you’re like a five year-old.”

“I love you, Arthur. I’m sorry for what I said. Will you forgive me?”

Arthur paused. Then, he broke out of Alfred’s grasp and he shifted so that their foreheads were touching, and he brought his hands up to wipe the tears on Alfred’s cheeks. His hands were cool, soft, against Alfred’s hot skin. His face looked exactly the way Alfred had imagined it—but his eyes, his eyes were different. They sparkled.

“Of course I forgive you, idiot,” he said with a dry smile. “Just stop crying. Otherwise I’ll start crying, too, and then you’ll feel even worse.”

“Do you really not love me?”

Arthur closed his eyes for a moment. Then he inched his head forward and he kissed Alfred’s lips, covered in his salty tears. Alfred was so relieved, because he’d been afraid for a bit that he’d never be able to feel those lips again.

“Don’t be daft. I love you more than I can say.” He kissed him again, and held it for longer this time. To reassure Alfred that he was telling the truth, through nothing but the taste of his lips. “I’m sorry I

called your dream fucked up. It's not fucked up. It's a very good dream, actually. Better than anything I've ever had."

"I'm sorry I made you feel worse about everything."

"I already forgave you, stop apologizing."

Alfred smiled, laughed in pure relief, and wrapped his arms around Arthur. Held him tight, tight, tight against his chest.

"Al, you don't have to hold me so tight."

"Yes I do."

"You're too strong for me."

Alfred touched his lips to Arthur's forehead and said, "I want to make love to you."

Their clothes began slipping away as they yearned for each other's touch, hoping to transmit their apologies and their forgiveness through the nimble movements of their tongues, their fingers, their legs intertwining and their hands clasping. And when they were done, breathless and sweating and absolutely, undeniably in love, they shared a cigarette and ate the entire block of Toblerone.

The next evening, Arthur said that before he started cleaning his act up (for himself, not for anyone else, he reassured Alfred), he wanted to get blackout drunk one last time.

"I've never even seen you get drunk," Alfred replied.

"For a very good reason, love. Just take me to a bar tonight, yeah?"

They got dressed, in their jeans and t-shirts—Alfred with his glasses and his hair gel, even though that one strand of hair never seemed to behave, defiant even to his mother and Lizzie. Arthur with his necklaces, his rings, the tattoos that marked his body glistening and sparkling from the special spray he had in his bag.

"You have sparkle spray?"

"Of course. Every British person has sparkle spray in their man



purse. It's a rite of passage."

"Right."

They walked about ten minutes, to a bar that François and Antonio recommended to them. As they walked out of the lobby, though, François mouthed to Alfred, "Be careful." Like he was stepping into the maw of some giant, evil, really drunk creature.

The bar was relatively quiet. This place seemed to Alfred more like a family getaway, but the atmosphere was nice, anyway. Nothing like the vibrant, colorful nightlife in New York City. It looked old-fashioned and cozy, with so many different types of beer and old men sitting and smoking at the far end of the bar, a deer head over the fireplace, a bartender with a gentle smile. They sat down at the bar and the man, with a foreign accent, greeted them.

"What're you drinking, Arthur?" Alfred asked. "It's on me."

"Of course it is. Do you have ale?"

"Two ales, then," Alfred said. The bartender smiled and began filling their mugs. Before he had even put them on the counter, Arthur had grabbed it and taken a swig. He leaned his elbows on the counter and stared at its wooden surface, perhaps at his reflection, perhaps at nothing at all.

"I don't usually drink very much," he said.

"How come?"

"Well, first of all, there's a ridiculous amount of calories in these demon pints. I'm sure you know."

"Yeah. Coach doesn't let me drink that much."

"Second of all, I'm a rather nasty drunk."

"I can't imagine someone like you being *that* bad," Alfred lied. The truth was, he was a bit frightened.

"Lucky for you, old boy, you'll get to see it firsthand. Cheers."

"Cheers..."

They clinked their mugs together.

Arthur got drunk much more quickly than Alfred had been expecting. They were drinking about the same, but Arthur's cheeks became red and his speech became slurred way sooner.

"Hey, Arthur, you sure you wanna drink more?" he asked, a smile on his lips and holding back his laughter. Arthur clanked his mug against the counter and swayed a bit in his chair.

"How dare you?! I can drink everyone here under the fucking table, mate, under the fffucking table! Gimme another."

"Whatever you say, babe."

"Cheers!"

"Cheers."

When he'd said he wanted to get blackout drunk, he really had meant it. He got loud, so loud that everyone in the bar could hear his sloshing voice. And his profanity filter, which wasn't too effective to begin with, all but disappeared, to the point that almost every other word he said was rather vulgar. Some of the insults that spewed from his mouth Alfred couldn't even understand—British English, he learned, was rather colorful. He was having a hard time feeling worried, or even concerned at all, because watching Arthur slip into his drunkenness was fucking hysterical. Alfred was holding in his bursts of laughter, exchanging looks with the bartender, responding to Arthur's pointless questions with pointless answers.

But Arthur's mood began to change as he got more drunk. At first, he was funny, vulgar, crude, not really paying attention to his surroundings. But then he began to get angry, frustrated, upset, disillusioned. Like the alcohol was bringing the insecurities he kept deep inside up to the surface. Dredging up old, thrown-away memories to haunt him out here in the open.

"Mum hates it when I...when I drink," he announced, waving his mug in the air. "Look at me now, Mummy dearest! I'm as good a drinker as *Dad*, aren't I?"

He took another swig and then pounded on the counter with his fist.

"But she doesn't mind when Connor drinks, when Connor dddrinks, it's cute, isn't it, Mum? Well *fuck you, Connor!*"

Alfred assumed that Connor was one of Arthur's younger brothers.

"And you know what? Fuck you, too, Mum. And you, Dad, you drunk bastard," he breathed. "Alfred here thinks I'm *perfect*, so youuu tossers can go bloody fuck yourselves. Right Alfred? Al? Alfie? My darling little American boy."

Arthur had never mentioned anything about his father's drinking habits. In his drunkenness, Arthur draped himself over Alfred, grumbled against his neck and cried out for another drink. He was singing.

"You'll be my American boy," he hummed. "Oi, I need me another pint over here!"

Somehow his accent became even more pronounced when he was drunk. Alfred smiled apologetically at the bartender, who shook his head and said, "I think your friend has had enough."

"Fuck you, bartending twat! I could still drink *all* night and be bloody sober," Arthur cried.

"Sorry," Alfred said. "Arthur, you're already drunk."

"What would you know about it, brat?" Arthur leaned more of his weight against Alfred, falling out of his chair. "You're just a kid, aren't you?"

"I'm twenty-one, babe."

"You don't know the first thing about drunk, you just know how to make other people feel like shit, that's all you're good for! That, and punching things."

Even as Arthur said it, he was still clinging to Alfred. His words didn't hurt Alfred, because Alfred already knew that he'd made Arthur feel like shit, and in a strange, guilt-driven sense, he was glad that Arthur was finally bringing it up. Though, sober, he never would have said that to Alfred. So Alfred didn't mind at all. He let Arthur say what he wanted and kept smiling.

"We should probably get you back to the room, Arthur," he said. Quietly, gently.

"I'm not tired, and I still wanna drink more!"

“No more drinks. C’mon, up we go.”

“Alfreeeed!”

It was easy to support Arthur because he was so light. He’d always been light. Every single time Alfred had carried him—in his arms, on his back—he’d felt like a feather. Wrong, like it wasn’t possible that a personality as big and beautiful as Arthur’s could fit into such a delicate physical frame. Alfred helped Arthur’s arm around his shoulder, paid the bill, and together they stumbled from the bar. Arthur didn’t resist, probably because he was totally unaware of what was happening, but he continued yelling obscenities. Mostly directed at his parents, occasionally at François, occasionally at Alfred. When they finally made it back to the inn, he had exhausted himself, could barely walk if Alfred hadn’t been dragging him. He was mumbling to himself, and when he saw François, he stuck his tongue out.

“Stupid frog, you never let me drink,” he said. François raised his eyebrows and puckered his lips.

“Is that so? Well, then your memories must be very different from mine.”

“But you know, I’m glad I fucked you for so long. It made Mum so mad that I was fucking a man. And a fucking *French* man at that. Ha! No grandchildren for you, Mum!”

“I think I’m just gonna take him up to bed,” Alfred murmured.

“Good idea. *Bonne nuit.*”

When they were back in the room with the lights on, and Arthur saw the bathroom, something must have been triggered in his body. He lunged toward the bathroom and knelt at the toilet, vomiting this time not of his own will. Alfred knelt on the floor beside him and rubbed his back, whispered in his ear, Hey, you’re okay, I’m here, don’t worry, let it all out, I love you, shh. He wondered if, in the times that Matthew had come to visit him in New York, his brother had ever done this sort of thing for him. Alfred had had a few terrible drunken nights like this himself. He had made sure tonight, though, to be careful. Just a little bit tipsy, so he could properly care for his completely inebriated companion.

“Sorry,” Arthur grumbled. “It’s not on purpose this time, I promise.”

“Man, you’re even funny when you’re puking your guts out.”

Alfred helped Arthur into the shower, helped him into his pajamas, enchanted by the strange juxtaposition of childlike behavior and vulgar language. As he got Arthur into bed, he brewed him a cup of tea and got him a glass of water. Then he burrowed under the covers alongside him. The alcohol hadn’t worn off yet—he was still drunk, and absolutely exhausted.

“Al, I want another drink,” he cooed.

“Fuck no. Here’s some tea.”

“Wha, just because I’m British I’ll drink tea all the damn time?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re right, give it here.”

He took a sip, and then he cuddled up beside Alfred and kissed his shoulder.

“Alfred, let’s have sex,” he murmured. “I’m horny.”

“No.”

“Whyyyyyyyy?”

“Because you’re drunk as shit, dude.”

“Oh come on, pleaaaaase?”

“Sorry, no can do tonight.”

“You’re such a bloody twat.”

Before Arthur had even finished his precious cup of tea, he’d passed out, curled up like a kid under the covers. Alfred was swimming in his adoration, disabled by how much affection he was feeling. He put a kiss to Arthur’s forehead and brushed his teeth, changed into his boxers and t-shirt, turned off the lights, and fell asleep with Arthur in his arms.

“Idiot, why’d you let me go to bed so fucking sloshed?”

The next morning, Arthur's head was being split open. Everything hurt. He needed darkness, he needed silence, he needed water, he needed pancakes or something. He sat in bed, the blankets completely covering his body, his eyes and head not ready at all to confront the light of the sun. Alfred was meandering around the room, somewhere, laughing his ass off.

"I can't remember the last time I had a hangover this bad," he grumbled. "I hate everything."

"Okay, but you're a hilarious drunk."

"I don't remember anything at all."

"The city should probably be sending the damage repair bills soon..."

"Shut the fuck up."

"You just cursed a bunch and threw up everywhere. And insulted the bartender's mother a few times."

"I hate my life so much."

"Come on, just pop some aspirin and you'll be fine."

"Just kill me."

He spent the day in bed getting his wits back. As much as Arthur liked to insult François, he always made Arthur feel guilty with his kind gestures—he sent Antonio up to their room with pancakes. Knowing, after years and years of friendship with Arthur, that he would be craving them. He sat in bed and ate his pancakes, along with the rest of the Toblerone, and chainsmoked until the dizziness overshadowed the splitting pain.

But by evening, he'd managed to somewhat recover. Alfred, who was now restless and bored like a puppy, was eager to get out of the room. Arthur looked at his face, and when he saw Alfred's blinding smile and felt his warm, earnest touch, he forgot what he'd said. He heard only his smooth voice saying he was sorry and that, no matter what anybody thought, he loved Arthur. Arthur was glad that Alfred hadn't let him drive him away. He was glad that he'd pushed through Arthur's façade and stayed. He couldn't even describe the happiness, the relief that he felt. Alfred had seen through him and held him and said, No matter what you say to drive me away, I'm going to stay.

Arthur felt, for the first time, that he wanted to get better. Because someone like Alfred genuinely believed that he deserved it. Now he felt like he deserved it, too.

*I don't deserve this pain.*

He kept repeating it in his head so that he wouldn't forget it. At the same time reassured that Alfred would continue to remind him, even if he did forget.

They went for a walk around the lake, holding hands. Alfred talked and talked and talked, and Arthur smoked his cigarettes and thought about all of the secrets that he wanted to tell Alfred. Things that he'd never told anybody else, and now wanted so badly to tell this kid who'd popped up in his life out of nowhere, to whisk him from a hospital and bring him to Lake Placid. Things about his parents, and the things they'd said to him to make him feel like he was nothing. Things about his brothers, and how he wished that he was closer with them. Things about his relationship with François, how it had left him closed off from others. Things about the modeling industry, how stressful it could be and how these people couldn't possibly expect him to do what he did. It wasn't human sometimes.

But for now, he let Alfred talk. Because he had a feeling that not a lot of people had listened before. He wanted to be the one to listen.

“Hey, Alfred. Can I ask you something personal?”

“Only if you stop calling me Alfred.”

“How did you feel?”

“Huh?”

“How did you feel, when Ivan the Terrible was stealing your eyesight from you? At that very moment, what were you thinking?”

“Oh. Uh, well, I was confused. It hurt like hell, too.”

“Were you worried about losing?”

“No, not really. I think I was losing it myself a bit. I just wanted to keep fighting, even though I couldn’t move. I could taste blood and everything was white, but I knew Braginsky was still standing, so I wanted to keep fighting.”

“You really didn’t notice.”

“Nope. Coach stopped the fight.”

“What about when you woke up in the hospital?”

“I...”

Alfred closed his eyes and felt the contours of Arthur’s lips on his neck.

“I’d never been so terrified in my entire life.”

“You thought you were blind forever.”

“Yeah. And I was having trouble breathing so there was a tube in my mouth and I couldn’t talk. Couldn’t see, couldn’t talk. I even convinced myself that I couldn’t move.”

“Were you afraid that you’d never be able to fight again?”

“Yeah. The thought scared the shit out of me. I don’t really have



anything except this.”

“That’s not true.”

In the darkness, Alfred wondered what the marks that Arthur’s lips left looked like. He reached out and pressed his fingers to Arthur’s back and tried to trace the tattoo. His favorite was the one on his back. The rose. It looked the most beautiful.

“You’re biased though, babe.”

“That may be true. But I think you’re very brave, bright, and bold. If you didn’t have fighting, there’s plenty of other things you could do.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Start a business. Own a gym yourself. Make those cheesy workout videos. Host a game show. Be an actor. Sell chocolate at one of those duty-free stores in the airport.”

They swam together in the moonlight, their indentations deep and sharp in the bed. Their voices were low, reaching for each other in the silence, desperate to grab something palpable. Alfred breathed in and he could smell roses. It was that tattoo, he told himself, because Arthur was never around roses.

“You could be a model for those art classes. The ones that paint nude models every time.”

As Arthur said it, he ran his fingers along the defined muscles of Alfred’s skin. He drew pictures—a map of the UK, a map of America, the secrets they’d revealed to each other, cigarettes they’d smoked together and chocolate they’d eaten together and mountains they’d scaled together. Arthur kissed Alfred’s lips and breathed into him his burdens, his tears, every terrible thing he’d ever said. Alfred turned his face up and thought, for an inexplicable reason, about God looking down at them. Did he approve? Or did he think they were stupid for believing that they loved each other? Alfred was dreaming now, spinning, no longer in this world or in this body. The nighttime silences and secrets and romances were getting to him. He opened his eyes and he looked at Arthur and his heart swelled.

“You’re like a painting,” Alfred whispered against his lips. “You move like watercolor. You breathe out colors of the sunset, you blink in shades of grass and emerald green. You touch me the way an artist

touches brush to canvas, you mark my skin and bleed your paint onto me. Sometimes you're saturated and bright, sometimes you speak in gray and black hues. Everything about you is beautiful."

"Tell me."

"Look at your lips—they dance and they speak acrylics. Your eyes are each a different universe that I'm floating between. I'm trapped in that little gap between your teeth. I put my palms against your chest, like this, and the touch overwhelms me so much that I worry for a moment that I've lost my heartbeat. That mine is yours, yours is mine, I don't know. When you yell at me I hear music. When I carry you on my back I feel like a missing piece has been fitted to me."

"You're speaking like a poet."

"Because you make me one."

"If I told you that I never wanted to see you again, what would you say?"

"I would laugh at you. I would kiss you and say, funny joke."

"What if I meant it?"

"Don't make me think about it."

"What if, one day, I just disappeared? Without a trace?"

"I'd look for you."

"Without a lead?"

"I'd do whatever I could to find you."

"What would you say to people?"

"That I'm looking for my soulmate."

"Soulmate."

"Mhmm."

"How do you know we're soulmates and not just dumb lovers?"

"I don't."

“Say that you love me.”

“I love you.”

“Again.”

“I love you.”

“Will you say it whenever I tell you to?”

“Yes.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“Aren’t you gonna ask me to say it, too?”

“You don’t have to say it. I know you do.”

“Want me to say it anyway?”

“Yes.”

“I love you. And you need to shave.”

“We probably have to go back to New York City soon.”

“You’re right. I have to get back to London.”

“London is far.”

“Not for a hotshot athlete like you.”

“You should just stay in New York.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“My heart is in London.”

“I thought your heart is with me.”

“Al.”

“No, you’re right. Kinda like how my heart is in New York, but also with you.”

“Yeah.”

“You smell like roses.”

“That’s strange. You smell like...I don’t know. You smell like you.”

“Can we just stay here forever? Then you don’t have to go out there and be surrounded by people who make you hurt yourself.”

“And you won’t have to worry about Ivan the Terrible.”

“Not possible, though, right?”

“Of course not.”

“You’ll get better. Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good.”

“Al.”

“Mm?”

“What would you do if I died?”

Alfred’s heart beat furiously and he put his arms around Arthur and turned and faced him and they sank into the sheets together, bleeding them with their colors. He tried to leave his fingerprints on Arthur’s skin.

“Don’t ask me something awful like that. I don’t wanna think about it.”

“If you died, I would wear black for an entire year. I’d buy a corgi and name it Alfred, and I would talk to your brother at your funeral and we would become best friends. I would write in a journal every day about how sad I am that you’re gone, and I would keep your picture in my phone and on the desk next to my bed. I would cry myself to sleep every night.”

“How would I die?”

“Could be in another fight. A car accident. A freak plane crash while you’re on your way to come visit me in London. Any number of ways.”

“How about drowning?”

“No, never. You’re too good a swimmer.”

“Murder?”

“You’re too likeable.”

“Why are we even talking about this? It’s so dark.”

“Welcome to the inner workings of my mind. Otherwise known as hell.”

“I won’t die on you, all right?”

“I know. I’m just teasing.”

“Weird way to tease.”

“Do you mind if we stop talking now? I don’t feel like I’m loving you hard enough.”

They crashed against each other like waves. If their breaths, their moans, were visible, they would have been blood red. Shadows played on their fingertips and made their backs look like canyons. Alfred leaned down and kissed Arthur with desperation, suddenly aware of the fleeting time closing in on them. He dived into Arthur as deeply as he could, so deeply that he was burned by the fire inside him. Was there a fire like that in Alfred, too? When Arthur kissed him, did he taste the flames, too?

They were slow, they were passionate, they were so close that their eyelashes touched. Alfred became lost in Arthur’s fingers running through his hair, in his tongue like candy, his breathing like the drops of sand in an hourglass.

They loved so hard that they couldn’t breathe anymore. They loved so hard that they couldn’t sleep. They loved so hard that they couldn’t say anything but each other’s names.

“Arthur.”

“Alfred. Beautiful, crazy Alfred.”

“If you had to guess, how many times can a person say I love you in a lifetime?”

“Infinite.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

“But we can try anyway.”

“Does it have to be out loud?”

“No.”

“Stop looking at me like that, Al.”

“Huh? Like what?”

“Like...like I’m the greatest thing you’ve ever seen.”

“But you are. Just like this. Tired, kind of pale, dripping in moonlight.”

Alfred kissed his lips. Now he tasted like roses, too. Arthur smiled, laughed, hugged the pillow, let himself be kissed.

“What do I taste like?”

“Roses and cigarettes.”

“What a nice taste. You taste like sweat and rain. Clean rain.”

“That’s nice, too.”

“Actually, I want a smoke.”

“Whatever you want.”

Arthur went out to the balcony and smoked a cigarette staring out at the lake. Being stared at from the bed. Alfred began to cry, quietly, because his heart couldn’t quite take it anymore. He’d never even imagined loving someone like this. He’d never felt that he would take a bullet for someone, that he would let himself be trampled on for someone, that he would do absolutely anything just so that someone would keep saying I love you and kissing him.

“I’ll never leave you. You know that, right, Arthur? You know I’ll keep loving you?”

“For some reason, I believe you.”

“Will you always love me, too?”

“Every second of every day for the rest of my forsaken life.”

“Okay. Good. So we’re even.”

“Even. Sure.”

“I’m going to sleep now, babe. I can hardly keep my eyes open.”

“Sleep well, love.”

Alfred closed his eyes and he slept, with tears in his eyes.

When Alfred woke up, late the next morning, Arthur was gone. Alfred panicked. He put on mismatched clothes and he ran up and down the hall calling Arthur’s name. He checked the bathroom in the lobby, he asked François and Antonio, who both said that they hadn’t seen him. But when he went back upstairs to get his car keys, he noticed a piece of paper sitting on the desk, written in too-beautiful cursive handwriting. Alfred grabbed the paper and read it while his breathing was heavy and raspy, his eyes wide, his lips trembling.

*“To my dearest Alfred, love of my life. I’m sorry I left without saying goodbye. It wasn’t fair of me, but I couldn’t bear the thought of looking into your eyes and leaving you. At least for now. We’ll meet again soon. I hope you don’t think that I left because I don’t love you—I love you more than I could ever write in words. But after the past few days in Lake Placid with you, I realized that I need time to fix myself. You put me on the right path to doing it and gave me the confidence that I need, but I have to walk the path myself. I need to work on me. I hope you can forgive me. Wait for me, just a little bit. Train hard and take back what was stolen from you. Soon our paths will converge again. We’re soulmates, after all, aren’t we? Thank you for the pack of cigarettes and the chocolate. And thank you for the love that you gave me. I will cherish it always. Until we meet again, soulmate.”*

Alfred read through the letter maybe ten times, tears flowing harder every time. He was hurting. His heart was aching. The room was empty and quiet and he fell down to the floor with the letter crumpled up in his hands. At first, he tried to hold it in. He hated

crying. He'd cried more in the past few weeks than he had in the past ten years. He couldn't hold it in for very long, though, when he imagined Arthur in some taxi back to New York City, calling Kiku on a payphone, paying for tickets back to London. He sobbed like a child, until he couldn't see and he couldn't breathe, and François knocked on his door and forced his way in and then held him like a mother.

"It's all right, Alfie, it's all right," he shushed. "You'll see him again. You'll see him again soon."

He didn't say anything else. He just rocked him back and forth and stroked his hair. He let Alfred be sad, because it was the only thing Alfred could be. He still knew that Arthur loved him. He could feel it, deep inside, that Arthur loved him just as much as he loved Arthur. And he knew that Arthur had only done what he felt was right for him to do.

*But it still hurts like hell.*

That evening, Alfred packed what little things he had and he thanked François and Antonio for letting them stay so long. He gushed to them, with bloodshot eyes and a hoarse voice, about how much fun he and Arthur had had. And he promised that he would come visit.

"If you're ever in the Big Apple, hit me up," he smiled.

"Of course. We'll come see you. Right, Antonio?"

*"Claro."*

He got into his car and he drove the five hours to New York, by himself, and he listened to Ben Howard. He called his brother and said that he was coming back to his apartment, and wondered if he wanted to have dinner. He called Coach and he apologized for being gone so long, but said that he was ready to start training again, and training hard. They both said, Don't worry about it, Al. We're glad you're feeling better. He tried to not sound sad on the phone, but he probably did anyway.

He was relieved to see Matthew in front of his apartment when he arrived. He hugged him without even a word of greeting and held him for a minute in silence. Matthew hugged him back and said, "You smell like lake."

Over dinner—they ordered pizza to the apartment—Alfred explained to Matthew everything that had happened since he and



Arthur had snuck out of the hospital. As he told the stories, he felt himself smile, felt his chest swell with the beautiful emotions. He told Matthew how in love he was with Arthur Kirkland, how sad he was that he was gone, he handed him the crumpled up note and Matthew smiled.

“Well, lucky for you, it seems like he’s in love with you, too.”

“Yeah.”

“Soulmates? Jeez, Al, you’re so cheesy.”

“Shut up, Canadian.”

“Hey, I have an idea.”

“What’s up?”

“What do you say that tomorrow we go and get you some contact lenses, eh?”

“I think that’s an amazing idea.”

Matthew wrapped his arm around Alfred’s shoulder and ruffled his hair.

“I’m glad you’re back, bro.”

“Glad to be back. And I’m glad you’re here.”

Matthew could see his sadness. Could see his heart breaking in the absence of someone with whom he’d spent almost every moment for the past three weeks. Though it seemed like a lifetime. Alfred really had loved Arthur for a lifetime. Ten lifetimes. How long had they been together? He wasn’t really sure.

But he was sure that Arthur was right—that soon, they would meet again. But for now, they had obligations to themselves. Arthur to make himself better, Alfred to train for the dreams he’d been chasing for years.

They were walking separate paths now.

But they would converge soon.

Alfred could feel it.

Alfred immersed himself in training as he never had before. Coach didn't punish him or ask him questions about where he'd gone and what he'd done—he wasn't his father, or even his guardian, after all. He let Alfred be. But when he walked into the gym again, wraps already on his hands and brand new prescription contact lenses in his eyes, he looked Coach in the eyes and told him that he was ready to be a champion again.

“Are you sure, champ? It'll be a lot of work and a lot of patience.”

“I'm sure. I'm not in a rush. When I fight Braginsky next, I want to be ready to pound his face in once and for all.”

“And when will that be...?”

“One year.”

“All right. Let's get to business.”

Every morning, he would wake up at five, rub the sleep from his blurry eyes, splash cold water in his face, and have half of a banana. Then he would go to Central Park and run five miles, thinking about how much he wanted a golden retriever when he saw other dogs. He became friends with the Korean man who sold coffee at a little cart, and they would have short conversations when Alfred ordered a latte after his run every day. While he was sweaty and smiling and had headphones around his neck. After his run, he would go straight to the gym, where Coach was waiting, expecting him to be warmed up and full of caffeine. He would lightly spar with a few other members of the gym, to get his blood pumping and feel the rhythm of his body's movements. Even going easy, after a few months, nobody could touch him. After sparring they would do core training—to tone that six pack of yours, champ!—and after core training they would head to the machines to work weights. Arms, legs, bench presses. Until the muscles in his arms ached and he could bench press 260. After weights, he would work the jumprope, the ladder, do agility training and drills. Only then would he work on the actual fighting techniques. The punches, the kicks, the combos and the endurance. Three times a week he would full on spar with one of the more experienced members of the gym. On Sundays he would take a break and do hot

yoga, to give his body a rest.

He didn't have much time for anything else. He would get home in the evening absolutely exhausted, watch some television, call his brother or his parents. He found himself watching the pointless celebrity gossip news channels because he liked it when he saw Arthur's face there, or on the tabloids he saw in the pharmacies where he bought his painkillers.

He tried to call Arthur a few times. Every time it was Kiku who answered. And the conversation was always the same.

"Hello, Mr. Jones."

"Please, at least call me Alfred."

"Alfred."

"Is Arthur there?"

"He's busy right now. But I'll tell him that you called."

"Could you ask him to call me back? I just want to talk to him for a little bit."

"I'll tell him...but I don't think he will. He wants me to tell you that he loves you."

"Okay. Thanks, Kiku."

"My pleasure. Have a good day."

After a few months the pain went away (or maybe it didn't—maybe he just became numb to it), which didn't seem fair to Alfred. He'd heard before that if you take the time you spent in a relationship and divided it by two, then that would be how long it would take to get over it. He'd known Arthur for about three and a half weeks, but they'd only been really together for a week. So, based on the logic that had been so widely accepted, it should have taken him only a few days to get over it.

He was never over it, at all, but he stopped crying about it and feeling suffocating pain after a few months. The intense training was a good distraction. Coach taking him out for dinner and cooking for him once or twice a week was a good distraction. Matthew was a good distraction. Alfred went to visit him a few times in Toronto, though he

tried to avoid winter because New York was cold enough; he didn't need the Canadian winters to chill his bones even more. He wondered what winter was like in London. He read that it didn't snow much there and he felt both jealous and pitying.

Coach arranged for two fights for Alfred in the next year before he was to challenge Ivan the Terrible, still undefeated. At first, everyone was surprised that Alfred had returned so soon. They'd all heard that Braginsky had bashed his skull in, and even when he was back, they didn't expect much of him. Still, they called him 'The Hero.' It seemed like the nickname meant even more now after his miraculous recovery.

The first fight was in winter, after Alfred had been training for about four and a half months, against a Chinese man whose defense was almost impenetrable—they called him 'The Great Wall' Yao Wang. He was well-rounded but, with his small stature, people had a hard time understanding how he could take so many hits. His agility was the perfect addition to such strong defense. Alfred was nervous to fight him, worried for a moment that he really wouldn't be able to do it. That he'd get into the ring and relive the experience he'd had against Braginsky and freeze, leave himself open. But Coach held his face in his hands, looked into his eyes, and said, "You got it, champ. Don't think of anything but this moment. Nobody's looking at you. Just do what you know how to do."

Alfred knocked him out in less than thirty seconds with a single punch.

After that, people debated changing his nickname from 'Hero' to 'Monster,' but they decided that 'Hero' fit his personality much better.

He became friends with Yao Wang and they occasionally trained together.

Early the next year, François and Antonio came down to New York City to visit him for a few nights. Their presence was a breath of fresh air, even if it did painfully remind him of the fleeting moments he'd spent with Arthur.

The second fight was at the end of March, at which point Alfred had never felt so strong in his life. Coach had had a hard time finding a fight for him after what happened with Wang. But eventually, he managed to get a fight with a Cuban man who specialized in groundwork, a field that Alfred felt he definitely should have worked

on more.

“Not gonna lie, Al, if he gets you on the ground you’re done for. Your grappling is shit compared to his. But I don’t think it’ll get to that point.”

They called him ‘Sumo’ Máximo because his fighting style was strangely similar to a sumo wrestler’s.

The two fighters held a press conference a few days before the fight. One of the first questions was for Alfred. Coach was sitting in the front row.

“A question for Mr. Jones,” they began. “You’ve been on a roll after what happened with ‘The Great Wall.’ But Máximo poses a threat you’ve never seen before: someone whose talent lies in the ground. What will you do if he gets you to that point? Do you think you can hold your own in a grappling match?”

Alfred glanced at Coach. He was staring at him, expressionless, and threw him a quick nod. Alfred smiled and leaned forward into the microphone.

“Thanks for your question. Let me say that I respect Máximo. He’s done well in honing a specific fighting style, and that can be really deadly,” he started. He looked at Máximo. “And let me be honest and say that no. I can’t hold my own in a grappling match against Máximo. He’s out of my league.”

As he paused for a moment, smile unwavering, he heard murmurs begin to erupt in the crowd. It made him excited.

“I’ve answered your second question, so let me answer your first: what will I do if he gets me to that point.”

He paused again. Let the suspense build.

“He won’t,” Alfred said. “Everybody has weaknesses and everybody has strengths. My weakness is being on the ground. But my strength is getting other people onto the ground. So that they can’t get back up. I don’t see any takedowns in my future, if that’s what you mean. If he manages to get me to the ground, there’s really no point in calling me ‘The Hero.’”

His answer had just the effect he’d been anticipating. Everyone was a bit surprised and charmed at his honesty and, when he looked back

at Máximo, he saw the sweat on his temple.

In the ring, Máximo managed to last an entire round. But a minute into the second round, Alfred landed a kick to the side of his head and knocked him out with a punch to the jaw.

He made sure to avoid Máximo's eyes.

After the fight, Alfred asked Máximo and his coach if they wanted to join him for drinks. They, too, became friends—though Máximo could never hide the general disdain he felt for someone carefree, loud, somewhat offensive like Alfred.

All in all, Alfred put everything he had into his training. He dedicated himself to becoming stronger, faster, punching harder and quicker. He saw himself improving and it motivated him to go even further, to the point that he couldn't breathe at the end of his training sessions and he woke up every morning with an ache and painkillers became necessary parts of his meals. Coach told him at one point that maybe he should cool down, take a break—but Alfred knew that he couldn't. Not now, when he was so far. Not when he turned on the television or read sports magazines and saw Braginsky's face everywhere, sneering at him, becoming the new face of MMA.

And especially not when it meant fewer distractions from the fact that Arthur had left him and wouldn't even call him back.

It was July 3rd. Exactly one month before Alfred's fight with Braginsky—one month before the UFC 202. Coach had already promised Alfred the day off the next day. Both the legendary Fourth of July and his twenty-second birthday. It was his favorite holiday. Coach, sparkles in his ruby-violet eyes, had invited Alfred to his apartment for a pre-birthday dinner.

"I know you'll be with all your young friends tomorrow, so come over tonight and I'll cook you something."

"Sounds awesome, Coach."

Glasses on, headphones around his neck, wearing his Captain America t-shirt, Alfred sat at the dinner table in Coach's apartment. Coach was in the kitchen, hopping around like a child, flailing his cooking utensils like weapons and singing loudly in German. Alfred

liked watching him do mundane things, like cooking and cleaning—he always looked out of place. They sat down with two plates of *rouladen* with mashed potatoes. Alfred always loved coming over for dinner with Coach because it meant traditional German food.

“Eat up. Don’t worry about the calories. You look like a fucking sports illustrated model, so just stuff your face tonight.”

“Music to my ears.”

They ate together, they laughed together. Alfred wasn’t thinking about Braginsky. But, of course, he was thinking about Arthur. He was always thinking about Arthur. Arthur, who was climbing up in the world. Alfred was seeing him on more and more magazine covers, in more celebrity stories. Everyone was saying that he was now the top male supermodel in the business, that he was about to break into the acting world, that anyone who was anyone wanted to be around Arthur Kirkland. It made Alfred happy to hear about it. But it made things harder. It meant that Arthur’s presence in everything he did was even heavier.

During dessert, Coach became oddly serious. Alfred hadn’t seen that look cross his face since the day before his first fight with Braginsky. Furrowed brow, steely eyes, corners of his lips turned down and fists clenched. Like a strict, concerned father. Alfred blinked.

“Coach?”

“Al, I’ve been putting this off because I know you don’t want to think about it or talk about it. But I think I’ve put it off long enough.”

He made them tea, decaf, because he couldn’t sleep if he had caffeine after five.

“We should talk about what happened with Braginsky. I don’t want something like that happening again.”

Coach was right. Alfred didn’t want to think about it or talk about it—but he had avoided it this long. He’d run away until now. He nodded in silence, and Coach leaned his arms across the table.

“I’m not kidding. You have to be careful. More careful than you were the first time. More careful than you were with Wang, more careful than you were with Máximo.”

“It’s not like I wasn’t careful the first time! I just wasn’t ready.”

“I know, I know. You have to stay on your toes. I don’t just mean that literally. Braginsky, as I’m sure you know, likes to play dirty. He could’ve easily knocked you out with a punch to the jaw but he took your eyes out instead. The only word for that is dirty. Am I wrong? Overreacting?”

“No, you’re right.”

“He’s never been challenged by the same person twice. You’re a first for him. So he’s going to want to hurt you. Listen, Al.” Coach looked straight into his eyes. Held his gaze. “He doesn’t want to beat you. He wants to hurt you. And if he’s been continuing his training...”

Coach looked away.

“This time, he could kill you.”

“Oh, come on, boss, don’t you think that’s exaggerating just a little bit?” Alfred scoffed. “Kill me? I don’t think he’s *that* dirty.”

Coach was quiet for a few moments. Wouldn’t look up from his cup of tea. His knuckles were white and his face was pale, even paler than usual. Like the full silver moon.

“Hey, champ, wanna take a trip with me? I wanna show you something.”

“Uh, sure, I guess. Got nothing planned for tomorrow morning so I can stay out late.”

“We’re taking my car. Let’s go.”

Alfred didn’t bother asking where they were going. But after a few minutes, he realized that they were on a familiar road. It was the same way from Coach’s house to the hospital that he’d been in after his fight—the same hospital he visited once a month for a regular check-up. Coach parked a few blocks away and together, in silence, they walked inside. Alfred just followed Coach without a word. Being in the hospital, although he was accustomed to it by now, gave him chills. Terrible memories of his sightlessness, his absolute brokenness. And then good memories of the person in the wheelchair, the odd British man in the bed beside him, speaking late into the night and falling swiftly in love.



They took the elevator to one of the floors for long-term patients. The nurses at the station recognized Coach, and they let him through.

“You should take care of yourself more, Gilbert!” they gushed. “You look pale. Oh, who’s your friend?”

Coach knew his way perfectly, like he was walking through his own home. Alfred didn’t like the sinking feeling in his stomach. Coach led him to a room toward the end of the floor. There was only one bed inside.

Alfred recognized the person in the bed. He’d been inspired by him—at one point in Alfred’s life, the person lying on that bed had been his role model. But he looked different now than he once had. He was just skin and bones, and it was pale and hung like clothes out to dry. His cheeks hollow, complexion almost gray, lips dry and cracked. Blonde hair once shimmering now flat and colorless, blue eyes hidden behind closed eyelids. He looked like a shell of a person in that bed, like he’d once held something beautiful that had slowly seeped out of him with his shallow breaths. From a leak or something. He was on a ventilator, an IV in his arm. A strange, sad smile swept over Coach’s lips, and he sat down at the chair beside the bed.

“Hey. Hope you haven’t missed me too much since I’ve been gone,” he said, his voice playful. “But I brought a friend with me today. This is Alfred Jones. He’s a real good fighter—probably better than you ever were, sorry to say it.”

He gestured for Alfred to come sit beside him. Alfred didn’t want to. He felt like if he stepped closer, he would be leaving the comfort of his own bubble, the comfort of not having anybody to visit in this hospital. But he sat down anyway. Coach was holding the man’s hand.

“Alfred. This is—”

“Ludwig Beilschmidt. I know him,” Alfred said quietly. “He was the best fighter around a few years back. They called him ‘Blitzkrieg.’”

Coach nodded.

“I used to watch you on TV, when I snuck into sports bars because I couldn’t afford Pay-Per-View,” Alfred said to Ludwig. “You’re an amazing fighter. Nobody stands a chance against you. You’re so well-rounded and your punches could probably knock out a rhino.”

“They said he could’ve been the best in the world. One of the best

anyone had ever seen,” Coach murmured. “He was the UFC champion. One day a young man, with dreams of being a champion himself, challenged Ludwig.”

“It was Ivan Braginsky.”

“It was Ivan Braginsky. He hadn’t made any type of name for himself yet. But when he got into the ring...”

“I remember. Everyone was shocked.”

Alfred did remember. It was all over the news.

“In the third round, Braginsky took Ludwig out. He knocked him out with a hook. But Braginsky kept going—even after Ludwig was unconscious. He climbed on top of him and he kept going. Like a shark that’s tasted blood.”

“The ref had to get two people to help him pull Braginsky off.”

“After that, Braginsky earned the title Ivan the Terrible,” Coach continued. “Ludwig has been in a coma ever since.”

“He was yours, wasn’t he?” Alfred asked. “He was your fighter. You trained him.”

“He’s family, too.”

“What?”

“He’s my younger brother.”

Alfred was stunned into silence for a moment.

“But your age difference is so huge.”

“Let’s just say he was a surprise,” Coach smiled. “He wasn’t born until I twenty.”

“Wow.”

“He saw how I fought and he wanted to learn. So I trained him.” Coach reached forward and brushed a strand of Ludwig’s hair from his forehead. His eyelids didn’t even flutter. “And now he’s here. He’s been in a coma since that day. And when I look into Braginsky’s eyes, I don’t see any remorse.”

“There isn’t any. There’s nothing there,” Alfred said. “Absolutely nothing. He’s hollow.”

“I’ve already lost someone to that monster, Al.”

“I won’t let him do this to me.”

“Ludwig was confident, too.” Coach put a hand to his head. “You know, when you told me that you wanted to challenge Braginsky, I didn’t want to let you do it. I shouldn’t have. I mean, look what happened to you.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“And even now, when you came back and you said you wanted to try again. I almost said no right there. But...”

Coach looked up at Alfred. There were tears in his eyes and Alfred hated that.

“When I look into your eyes, there’s such a fire there. It’s different than Ludwig’s was. How can I say no when you’re so confident, so strong, so brave? When you want it so badly? I wasn’t strong enough to say no.”

“Coach, come on. It’s not your fault.”

“I don’t want this to happen to you. Not again,” he said. He buried his face in his hands and for the first time, Alfred watched Coach Gil cry. He didn’t look pathetic or weak. He just looked awfully sad, like he was carrying a terrible burden on his back. “The doctors say that there’s no chance of his recovery, but I can’t let him go. I can’t do it. I’m not strong enough.”

“You’re the strongest person I know, Coach.”

“Please promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me, Alfred. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise I’ll be careful.”

“And promise me that you’ll destroy that motherfucker.”

“I promise that I’ll destroy that motherfucker. He’ll never want to

fight again when I'm done with him," Alfred said. "I swear it."

"Shit, we should've brought him some *rouladen*," Coach sighed.  
"It's his favorite."

## Chapter Notes

ah it's almost done i'm getting impatient

thanks everyone for sticking with it (:

few more chapters!

xoxo

During the months that Alfred spent training incessantly, building himself up from the rubble, Arthur was doing the same. He was picking up his pieces, with his own two hands, and putting them back together. He worked hard on the photoshoots and the campaigns and the runway shows that Kiku organized for him, but he made sure to spread them out—he didn't want to overwork himself, stress himself out, bite off more than he could chew the way he had before. He sat down after his return from Lake Placid with Kiku and he said to him, "Kiku, I'm going to get better. Will you help me?"

"Of course. Please just tell me what you need from me. You'll get better."

Kiku was the perfect person for Arthur to lean on. He spoke with the right people, got him the right auditions and the right interviews, and when he had to, he pushed away the negatives. Told people to back off when he saw Arthur getting overwhelmed. He made sure to keep Arthur away from the notorious photographers, the notorious designers, the ones who made the models starve themselves. He supported Arthur when he said he wanted to go to therapy, and he reminded him to take his medications every day.

Arthur thought a lot about whether leaving Alfred was the right decision. He thought a lot about how Alfred might have helped him, pushed him forward on this path the way that Kiku was. But every time the thoughts crossed his mind he had to remind himself that having Alfred walk this path with him would have been a crutch—he would have leaned too heavily on him, and Alfred would have let him.

Kiku wasn't like that. It didn't mean that Arthur didn't love him. On the contrary, he loved Alfred more every single moment that he was away from him. But he forced himself to endure the pain of his absence because fixing himself at the moment was more important. He'd already admitted that Alfred wouldn't have helped, even if he'd tried his very hardest.

Of course, Arthur's recovery was gradual. It was difficult, especially at the beginning, to resist the urges to binge eat after periods of fasting. It was difficult to resist the urges to run into the nearest bathroom, lock the door, turn the sink on, and stick his fingers in his mouth. But the therapy helped. The medication helped. Kiku helped. The thought of meeting Alfred again, refreshed and fixed and a better version of himself, helped.

He watched Alfred's press conferences and he stayed up late to watch both of his fights.

He wondered if Alfred had forgotten about him, or if Alfred was keeping tabs on him, too. On how he was moving up, safely, landing another Vogue cover and being one of the main attractions in London Fashion Week.

At the beginning of the next summer, in May, Arthur had a big audition. His fingers were shaking ever so slightly as he lit up his cigarette in his central London apartment. He was sitting at his kitchen table, Kiku sitting across from him.

"We'll leave here at noon sharp tomorrow," he said. He was staring at the screen of his iPad. "We should be finished with the audition by two o'clock."

"Hypothetically, if I were to get this role, how long would filming take?"

"Approximately eight weeks, barring any unseen interferences. You'd have to talk with your agency, but I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem to push back any campaigns a few months."

"Eight weeks." Arthur said it, as if to reassure himself that that really was what Kiku had said. Kiku glanced up at him, blinked his round amber eyes.

"Something the matter, Arthur?"

"No. Just nervous, I suppose."

“That’s natural. It’s your biggest audition yet.” The corners of his thin lips turned up into a gentle, disciplined smile. “You’ll do well. I know you will.”

“I don’t have my hopes very high. It’s my first audition of this caliber, so I’m not expecting much.”

“That’s reasonable,” Kiku shrugged, “but at least you’ll be putting your name out there. It’s important to do that.”

“Of course. Especially with a director like this...”

“Two Oscars for best director. Four nominations total, including best picture.”

“You’re making me anxious, Kiku.”

“My apologies,” he said with a bow of his head. But he couldn’t hide his smile.

Arthur had always dreamt of breaking into the world of elite acting. He’d never imagined that he’d make such a jump as this, straight from the runway to the audition room of one of the most revered director/producer pairs in the entire film industry. Director Lovino Vargas and his younger brother, producer Feliciano Vargas. Two Italian men who were true artists, well-versed in the artistry of cinema. He’d loved their movies since their debut a decade ago.

The majority of filming for the movie was to take place in New York City.

“I really want this role, Kiku,” Arthur sighed. He crushed his cigarette and pulled out another one.

“I know you do. Just breathe, smile, and do your best. Oh, but be careful. I hear Lovino Vargas can be a bit...well, a bit frustrating.”

“Then I’m sure we’ll be good friends.”

The next day, Arthur and Kiku were sitting in the back of a car being driven to a building in northern London, where a director and his casting crew were waiting with glasses of wine and a bowl of crisps. He could hardly control his nerves. He had a headphone in one ear, and was listening to Kiku with the other. He was nibbling on his nails and tapping his foot against the floor of the car and he kept fixing his hair using his reflection in the tinted window. As he stared

at himself, with his furrowed brow and tight lips, he consciously made an effort to soften. He took a deep breath, and then tried a smile. After only a moment his scowl returned and he turned away. He'd always hated his smile.

"How do you feel, Arthur?"

"Just dandy. Can't you tell?"

"Try to relax."

"Could really go for a pint right now."

"After."

The chauffeur dropped them off at the building and wished Arthur good luck. Then he and Kiku went inside, he was given a copy of the screenplay to read over, and after ten minutes he was called inside.

On a beautiful morning in the middle of July, Alfred was on his run through Central Park. He was concentrating very hard on the small corgi that the woman jogging in front of him was walking—he thought about Arthur claiming that if Alfred ever died, he would buy a corgi and name it after him. He reminded himself to call him again later that day, even if Kiku answered. He was afraid that if he stopped calling, and Kiku stopped telling Arthur, "Alfred called again," Arthur might forget that Alfred still loved him.

At the end of his run, while he chatted with Im Yong Soo and drank his latte, he realized that he'd forgotten his knee brace at home. For the past few weeks his knee had been bothering him a bit. After a quick check with Coach and Dr. Laurinaitis, he was reassured that it wasn't something too dangerous, but wearing the brace was a good idea. He decided to run home and grab it before heading back to the gym.

He had his headphones in and was listening to Ben Howard. It was good cool down music, and it made him feel light and magical this early in the morning. He couldn't hear anything that was going on around him through the deep tones and rhythms flowing into his ears. He kept his eyes on the pavement, watched his own feet stepping forward.



“No man is an island,” he mouthed the words, “this I know.”

He looked up only when he'd reached the steps leading up to his apartment building.

And he found himself face to face with Arthur Kirkland.

Alfred stood, motionless, mouth open but no breath, no words escaping it. Arthur was sitting on the steps, leaning against the doorframe, smoking a cigarette and looking as if he'd been dragged straight out of a magazine spread. His eyes widened when he saw Alfred, and he gracefully stood up, lifted the cigarette from his lips, and crushed it beneath his boot. He mouthed something, but Alfred couldn't hear him. He realized that he still had his headphones on. With trembling hands, he put them around his neck, moving slowly, the way you do when you're trying to preserve your sleep during a dream you never want to end.

“A...Arthur...”

“It's been a while,” Arthur said quietly. “You look good, Al.”

Alfred couldn't say anything, even when he tried. He wouldn't have known what to say, anyway. He felt tears stinging his eyes, felt his heart shriveling, and reached up to his aching chest. This couldn't be real, he thought to himself, this isn't possible. There had been no warning, no change in his routine to indicate something like this would happen. That, a year since they'd first met, Arthur would show up on his doorstep with a cheeky little smile on his lovely little lips. He'd always toyed with his fantasies, dreamt that one day Arthur would magically pop back into his life—but he'd never entertained the thought that it might actually happen. He wouldn't have hurt himself like that.

But now Arthur was there. In front of him. Real.

They both stepped forward at the same time, and then they couldn't stop. Alfred wrapped his arms around Arthur's frame, held him so tightly that he couldn't breathe, that he was seeing flashing colors, that the only thing he could sense was Arthur. He buried his tear-stained face in Arthur's hair and breathed him in.

“You smell exactly the same,” he cried. “Like tea and roses and cigarettes.”

He kissed his cheek, his temple, over and over and over again until

he heard Arthur's laugh ringing through his mind like bells, wind chimes, an entire orchestra. He could feel Arthur's fingers grasping at his sweaty shirt and pulling. If anybody else was walking down the street, neither of them noticed.

"You smell like sweat."

"Sorry."

"No. It's a nice smell. It smells like you."

Alfred wasn't sure how long they stood like that, holding each other in the middle of the street, both perhaps in disbelief that the other wasn't just a figment of their imagination.

"Maybe we should go inside," Arthur whispered after an eternity.

"Okay."

Alfred didn't want to let go. He was convinced that if he did, Arthur would just evaporate, back to London, or back to anywhere that wasn't right here. He kept his grip tight on Arthur's hand as he led him up to his apartment. He sent Coach a message on his phone, telling him there had been an emergency and he wouldn't be able to go into the gym today.

"I'll train extra tomorrow, okay?" he promised.

When he and Arthur were finally in his apartment, together, alone, Alfred took his face in his hands and leaned forward and kissed him. He tasted the same, too. The shape, the curve, the indents in his lips were the same, the feel of his tongue the same, the rhythm of his breaths the same. When he pulled away, he saw tears on Arthur's cheeks, too. For some reason, it made him smile as he wiped them away. Arthur reached up and touched Alfred's trembling lips with his delicate, scorching fingertips. Alfred closed his eyes to take in every sensation, to lock them away in his mind forever.

"I missed you so much," Alfred breathed. "I missed you so fucking much."

"I missed you too, love."

Arthur, still grasping Alfred's hand, sat down on the couch. Alfred didn't sit beside him. He knelt down on the ground in front of him and put his lips against his knees while Arthur's fingers made their home

in Alfred's hair, twisted and turned and twirled his tangled locks.

"You've changed. A lot in one year," Arthur murmured.

"So have you. You look so much better."

"I am better."

"Did you get my calls? Did Kiku give you my messages?"

"Of course he did. Every day."

"Why didn't you ever call me back?"

"I couldn't do it. Not while I was putting everything back together—I couldn't risk losing it all. I would've depended on you too much."

"I've never understood you."

"That's all right. I'm here now. I'm better."

"Does that mean you want to be with me?"

"I've always wanted to be with you," Arthur laughed. He leaned down and put his lips against Alfred's head. "But now I'm actually ready for it."

"I'm...I'm so glad."

Alfred couldn't stop those stupid tears. But letting them out felt nice. It meant that he had something beautiful to cry about.

"Shh, my love, it's all right. Come here."

Alfred clambered onto the couch and lay his head in Arthur's lap. Looked up at his face, illuminated by the morning sunlight slipping in through the blinds. His face was brighter than before. His smile was so soft and affectionate. It set a fire in Alfred's soul, a fire that he wanted to reach in and touch so that it could burn the rest of him. His eyes were narrowed in the brightness, but they were greener than the grass in Central Park. Alfred reached up and brushed his cheek. Arthur grabbed his hand and kissed it.

"Hey, you got a new piercing," Alfred smiled. "Right here on your lip. How did I not notice?"

Arthur shrugged.

“Looks really good.”

“Your contact lenses look good, too,” Arthur said. They were both crying.

“I’m so happy to see you, Arthur.”

“I’m happy to see you, too, Al.”

“You’re beautiful.”

Arthur lay down on the couch beside him and they curled up into each other’s bodies, fit together perfectly, held each other as if it hadn’t been an entire year since they’d seen each other. It was as if only last night they’d laid together like this, the tips of their noses touching and the edges of their lips brushing. Hovering, breathing, reaching.

“Alfred, I love you.” Arthur’s whispers were hoarse and earth-shattering.

“I love you, too.”

“Do you? Do you really? Even now?”

“Especially now.”

“I’m sorry I abandoned you.”

“You didn’t abandon me. You just did what you needed to.”

“You’re too forgiving. I thought you would be angry with me when you first saw me.”

“Are you kidding? God, no.”

“If I were you, I would’ve told me to fuck off.”

“Good thing you’re not me.”

“We have a lot to catch up on, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we do.”

“I can tell you’ve gotten much stronger.”

“Yeah? Really?”

Alfred squeezed as tightly as he could, while Arthur squirmed and laughed against Alfred's throat.

He'd been dreaming about this for so long. Since the moment he'd realized that Arthur was gone. Holding him was too good to be true.

"You're still like a puppy starved for attention," Arthur said.

Alfred kissed his smile. It tasted like lake. He said I love you, over and over and over. As if to reassure himself that there was somebody real for him to say it to.

They lay like that for hours and they talked. Arthur explained to Alfred that he was in New York City filming for a movie, a recent role that he'd managed to get with one of the top director and producer in the business.

"You're amazing. As always," Alfred gushed.

"No, just very lucky."

"Come on, that's not a thing."

Alfred was ecstatic, relieved, to hear about the progress Arthur had made. About the therapy, the positive people he'd surrounded himself with, the legitimate motivation to get better because he deserved it.

"And what about you, hotshot hero? I watched your fights."

"No way, really? I can't even tell you how happy that makes me."

"You're better. A lot better."

"I have to be."

"You're fighting Ivan the Terrible in a few weeks."

"Yeah."

"Are you scared?"

"Fucking terrified."

"I don't know much about fighting, but my intuition tells me that you're ready."

"Well, I don't have a reason to not trust your intuition," Alfred

laughed. "But still. It's scary thinking about what he might do to me if I turn out not to be ready."

"What do you mean?"

"Braginsky's not the kind of guy to take challenges lightly. Just the fact that I'm challenging him for a second time is a kind of blow to his pride. He's out for my blood. He was out for my blood from the beginning. It's why he went for my eyes."

"Oh."

"He could kill me if I fuck up."

"Al, you're not serious."

"'Course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

Arthur propped his cheek up onto his elbow and furrowed his thick brow. He reached forward and brushed Alfred's hair away from his forehead.

"Don't tell me something like that," he sighed. "That you might die."

"Hey, it's okay, right? You already know what you're gonna do if I die."

"Stop joking for once, would you? I'm serious!"

"Sorry, sorry," Alfred chuckled. "But really, don't worry. I wouldn't challenge him if I didn't think I could win."

"Don't do anything stupid," Arthur sighed.

"I won't! I promise. I already promised Coach."

"Okay..."

"I won't die, Arthur. Not after I finally get to be with you."

"You're still as cheesy as ever."

Arthur fell back into Alfred's embrace.

"Will you come to Vegas with me?" Alfred whispered. "For the fight?"

“Of course I will.”

“Good.”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.”

“Again.”

“I love you, Arthur.”

“I love you more.”

“Not possible.”

“Would you mind making me a cup of tea? My head is killing me.”

“Your wish is my command. I can even make you breakfast.”

“Breakfast sounds wonderful.”

## Chapter Notes

disclaimer: I do not know Russian.

To see the English translation, just hover over (don't click on!) the Russian phrases

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xoxo

## 22

“So, would you really buy a corgi?”

“Sure I would. Did you know the Queen has several?”

“Maybe you should just buy a corgi anyway.”

“If you win.”

“You still have to name it Alfred, though.”

“I’ll name it Alfred F. Jones. The F will stand for Fuzzy.”

“Perfect.”

“Now you *have* to win.”

“For Alfred Fuzzy.”

Arthur, Kiku, François, Antonio, and Matthew all accompanied Alfred and Coach to Las Vegas the week of his fight. Arthur managed to get a week off from filming. The fight was expected to have one of the biggest turnouts in history: the first time someone was challenging Ivan the Terrible for a second time, and the first time in years that someone actually had a chance of taking his champion title from him. On the plane (Alfred had begged for a window seat like a child), Arthur and Alfred spoke to each other in hushed tones, played with each other’s fingers, fell asleep on each other’s shoulders. They whispered with lust in their voices, love in their words, paying no



heed to anyone around them. They couldn't feel the looks that people threw them, not even a little bit. For every moment that they were together, they were only aware of each other. Alfred saw Arthur's face there before him and he didn't want to see anything else. Didn't want to feel anything except for that touch.

He felt like he was walking through a dream every moment that he walked beside Arthur.

A few times, in the airport and on their way to the hotel, they were stopped by fans and paparazzi. Not for Alfred, of course, but for Arthur, whose face had become known by anyone who knew anything. He neither denied nor confirmed his romantic relationship with the MMA fighter Alfred Jones, though there wasn't much to deny—they held hands, they shared their lovers' secrets with quiet whispers, they exchanged chaste kisses on the cheek. Arthur yelled at Alfred when he did or said something stupid, and Alfred took it with a nervous smile. It was evident to everyone. They could feel it, the passion of such a love.

For the week that they were in Las Vegas, Arthur woke Alfred up at the crack of dawn every morning, motivated him to wake up with a kiss. Grabbed his hands, pulled him up out of bed. Seduced him with the slow blinks of dark eyelashes, by tracing the outlines of Alfred's tired, drowsy lips with his nimble tongue.

"That's not fair, Arthur," Alfred would grumble.

"Oh? Make me apologize."

They would get distracted and roll around in the sheets while the sun came up, trying to keep their voices down because Coach and Matthew were in the next room. They would fuck, and they would fuck hard. Arthur would bite down on his own hand to keep from crying out while the drops of Alfred's sweat fell down upon his cheeks. Alfred would lean down and moan into Arthur's ears, whisper his name, Arthur, Arthur, Arthur. Then, when they were exhausted again and their skin was rosy, Arthur would smoke a cigarette and Alfred would shower, basking in the afterglow of such glorious morning sex.

"Arthur, Arthur, Arthur..."

"Shit, I need a fucking smoke."

"When are you gonna stop? It's bad for you."

“When hell freezes over, I shall smoke my last cigarette.”

“Fuck, you’re sexy when you smoke.”

While he and Coach trained, Matthew and Kiku and Arthur and François and Antonio ran around Las Vegas. Alfred was jealous. He wanted to try his hand at poker, wanted to go hotel hopping, wanted to get drunk as hell with Arthur and party until they collapsed.

But when he saw the ads for his fight displayed around the city, the jealousy faded into determination. It was such an intense, dramatic ad—a photoshopped picture of him standing back-to-back with Ivan Braginsky. Their titles shimmering above them, both shirtless and sweating and fists clenched. Braginsky was holding the championship belt. Alfred remembered posing for the picture. It looked much better blown up like that. It didn’t make him nervous, like he thought that it might. It just fueled his intensity, his focus, made the adrenaline pump through his veins. This was why he fought, he reminded himself. To feel this rush.

Arthur sacrificed the nightlife of Las Vegas, claiming that he would come again, to give Alfred shoulder massages and fuck him to sleep when he came back exhausted from training. When Alfred was tired, could hardly move, Arthur would climb on top of him and bite his lower lip and swivel his hips, put Alfred under his twisted spell. Alfred would look up at him and see such breathtaking beauty, would feel so overwhelmed, that tears would flood his eyes and the physical pleasure would become saturated with happiness. Until he had to smother his face with a pillow to keep his voice down. He hadn’t remembered the sex being like this.

“God, Arthur.”

“Hey. Look at me. It’s not fun otherwise.”

“Don’t fucking stop.”

“What was that?”

“Don’t fucking stop, don’t...”

“Come on, say my name, Al. Say my name.”

The night before the fight, he couldn’t sleep. As was expected. He was surprised to find that he didn’t feel nervous. But he did feel jittery, restless, felt the warmth of his blood pumping and the

eagerness of his clenching and unclenching fists. His knuckles looked a bit too white. At two in the morning, when Arthur was asleep, he quietly snuck out of bed and put on his slippers and went out into the hallway. He made his way down to the lobby, not quite sure of what he was going to do there. Aimless, eyes glassy, he sat down in one of the fancy armchairs and propped his feet up on the table. There was nobody around but the concierge.

He began to doze off. At least, he thought he began to doze off. But when he was teetering, on the edge of the sleep, a hand clapped down on his shoulder and he jolted awake, groping to straighten his crooked glasses and wipe the drool from the corner of his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Hero. Did I startle you?”

Alfred stood up. Ivan the Terrible towered before him, hands clasped behind his back and a smile on his gray lips. He looked down at Alfred with those hollow, hooded eyes. Alfred hadn’t seen him since their fight. He looked even stronger. Muscles more toned, presence more intimidating, eyes more empty and smile more haunting.

“Not at all,” Alfred sneered.

“My, those glasses look so nice on you,” Braginsky said. “They bring out your eyes.”

Alfred didn’t respond. His heart began to speed up, his temper began to rise, but he pushed it down. If he lost it now, tomorrow would be hopeless.

“Had a good year, Hero? It sure looks like it.”

“Had a fucking great year, actually.”

“Good, good. You know, they say that the better your opponent, the better you yourself do.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

“I must say, Hero, I was surprised when you returned. You’re quite resilient.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but yes, I am.”

Braginsky raised an eyebrow and snickered. Like Alfred had said something terribly amusing.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, though,” Braginsky continued. “You will not win tomorrow, just as you did not win a year ago.”

“Yeah? How do you figure?”

“You’re still weak. Weaker than me. You’ll never even be on the same level as me. It’s obvious,” he shrugged, as if quoting a textbook. “You probably can’t even see the expression on my face without those glasses.”

Alfred paused and took a deep breath.

“What does that have to do with how strong I am?” Alfred crossed his arms and cocked his hips and would not avert his gaze.

“Come now. Don’t be foolish. It will perhaps be better for you to drop out now. Tomorrow will be embarrassing.”

“You’re right. Hope you can handle the loss.”

“You think you’re clever. I see it in your face,” Braginsky said. “You’re not clever. You’re nothing but stupid and prideful.”

“Listen, Braginsky, last year was a different story. I was just as stupid as you say. But it’s different now. Tomorrow you’re going to experience the worst loss of your life—I promise you that. I’ll make you regret ever laying a finger on me.”

“No, Hero. You listen to me.”

Braginsky stepped forward and grabbed Alfred’s collar in his big, strong hands. Pulled until their foreheads were touching and Alfred could smell his musky breath. He grit his teeth and stood his ground and stared into those eyes. But they were terrifying. He couldn’t see anything in them, not even a sliver of Braginsky’s soul. He wondered if it even existed.

“I see my mistake now. I let you off easy last time. I took only your eyesight. Tomorrow, I will take much more,” he hissed. “You will see your life flash before your eyes. You will wish that I had killed you last year so you wouldn’t have to endure the pain I will put you through. Yes, I admit it. Your return is embarrassing for me. I can’t let you hold it over me. I can’t let anyone hold it over me. I will end you,

Alfred Foster Jones. Every hero must fall, after all.”

Alfred couldn't deny the fear that rushed through him. Because even as Braginsky said the words, threatened Alfred's life, his smile was unwavering. As if it were painted, glued onto his face.

“Я убью тебя, герой.”

He let go of Alfred's collar and stood up straighter.

“Get a good night's rest. I cannot say if you'll need it or not, but perhaps it will give you some comfort.”

Braginsky turned to leave.

“I'm going to end your career,” Alfred said. “After what you did to me, to Blitzkrieg, to all those fighters. I'm going to make sure you never fight again. And I'm going to do it cleanly.”

“Clean? You must be joking. Do you really believe in such twisted standards of justice?” Braginsky laughed. “Do not be so naïve, Hero. Life is only about strength. No justice or evil, no heroes or villains, no clean or dirty. Only strong and weak. I am strong. You are weak. So I will win tomorrow and you will regret every breath you have ever drawn.”

“мы увидим, об этом, Иван Грозный,” Alfred said in perfect Russian. Braginsky blinked at him. “Удачи. Вы будете нуждаться в этом.”

Braginsky left without another word. Alfred let out the breath he'd been holding, thankful that he'd managed to draw that bit of Russian from his brain. If there was one thing Braginsky could do (and there was definitely more than one), it was frighten people. He had certainly succeeded in terrifying Alfred. He was shaking.

But he was excited, too.

That conversation was the exact push he'd needed.

*I'm going to fucking destroy you tomorrow, Braginsky.*

*Just you wait.*

He went back to his room and crawled into bed and wrapped his arms around Arthur and, in his daze, Arthur whispered to him, “Good night, Alfred, my love, please don't die tomorrow.”

“Hey, Arthur. I have a really good idea.”

“What is it this time?”

“What’s that tone? Anyway, I think we should do another roadtrip.”

“Sure. That sounds nice.”

“But this time, we can do it at your place.”

“In England, you mean?”

“We don’t have to necessarily do it there. I just want to drive with you. I want to see you next to me in the car, you know? We can listen to Ben Howard and Led Zeppelin and Eminem, and we can sing and we can hold hands and we can eat all the gummy bears we can stomach.”

“We can play truth or dare.”

“Yes! We can drive all day, and all night, and then we can have amazing car sex and—”

“You seem awfully excited about this.”

“I am. We’ll do it when I come visit you in London.”

“All right. As long as you pay for gas.”

“Seriously?”

The entire city of Las Vegas was rumbling beneath Alfred’s feet. He was trying to block it out for a few moments, to get his head on right. He needed to go through his pre-fight rituals. Drowning in his music, punching the bag, loosening his muscles, pumping himself up. He was already so excited that his heart was in his stomach, beating harder with every moment. He bounced to the beat of the music, mouthed the words along with Childish Gambino, imagined Braginsky’s smug face on the bag in front of him.

*I'm going to bash your fucking head in, you pretentious bastard.*

*I'm going to repay you for what you did to me.*

He felt a presence in the room. He turned around and saw Arthur, leaning against the wall, worry written on his face in bold letters. Alfred smiled, to reassure him as well as he could.

“How do you feel?” Arthur asked.

“Good. Ready,” Alfred replied. He took off his headphones and he moved to where Arthur stood. He put his hands on Arthur’s hips and felt Arthur’s hands run along his sweating arms.

“I’m glad.”

“Hey, come on. Don’t look so worried.”

“Sorry.”

“This isn’t like you. Where are your snarky comments? Your insults?”

“I’m saving them for after you win, of course,” Arthur grumbled. He smiled, but only for a moment, before the smile faded. “You are going to win, right?”

“Arthur. Come on, look at me.”

He lifted Arthur’s chin in his cupped fingers and stared into his watery eyes.

“Everything is going to be fine. I promise.”

“How can you promise something like that with such certainty?”

“Because I *am* certain. I’m going to beat Ivan the Terrible, and I’m going to make him regret picking a fight with me.”

“You know what I was thinking?”

“Hmm?”

“In a way, I’m grateful to him. If he hadn’t done that number on you, we never would have met.”

Alfred paused.

“Wow. I’d never even thought of that before.”

“You should still win, though. You should still be ruthless.”

“To be honest, I think we would’ve met anyway. That’s the point of a soulmate, right?”

Alfred kissed Arthur. He kissed him hard. As confident as he tried to sound, as much as he smiled, he was still terrified inside. Screaming. Worried that this really would be his last fight, the last time he would get to kiss Arthur like this.

“I’m gonna win, babe. I swear it.”

Arthur put his hands on Alfred’s cheeks and held him like that, froze, and together they created this memory in their minds. Afraid together, excited together, so in love. Alfred watched the breaths leave Arthur’s lips and sit on his. He watched his eyelashes brush his cheeks, watched the tears ebb and flow on the verges of his eyes. He felt Arthur’s thumbs trace his lips, felt his fingers tug at the corners of his eyes.

Just then, Coach walked into the room.

“Oi. Al. Time’s up.”

“I love you, Alfred, okay? I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ll see you after the fight. We’ll go celebrate.”

Arthur succumbed to his emotions—Alfred could see it in his eyes. Could feel it when he threw his arms around him and squeezed, squeezed, squeezed. Alfred kissed his neck and whispered, “I’ll be fine. I promise you.”

With one last kiss, crushing Alfred’s open lips, Arthur left. He kept looking over his shoulder, trying his best to smile. He walked until Coach and Alfred were alone.

“You ready, champ?”

“I don’t really have a choice at this point, do I?”

“You’re ready. Really ready.” Coach clapped him on the back and began to lead him toward the ring’s entrance. “But don’t forget what we said. Don’t forget about the people who are waiting for you to come back. Me, Mattie, Arthur. If things look bad, you’ll stop the



fight. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Al.”

They were about to enter the stadium. Alfred felt he was about to burst. Coach put his hands on Alfred’s shoulders, looked into his eyes, pulled him into his embrace. Then he smacked his cheeks.

“Go fuck him up, Alfred.”

He walked out into the ring. Everyone erupted, caused an earthquake, pumped their fists in the air. He was deafened by the shouts, blinded by the lights, overwhelmed by the sensations. Walked forward until he reached the ring. Jumped up and down, cracked his neck, threw a few punches at the air, made sure his contacts were secure. He looked back at Coach one more time, smiled at him, winked. Then he stepped up into the ring. And there was Braginsky, across from him, pounding his fists together and grinning. His coach was standing outside the ring behind him, arms crossed, her face stoic and serious. She didn’t look concerned at all, though.

It was so similar to the first time. Except he wasn’t humming to himself this time. He wasn’t so lighthearted. The announcer called their names.

“Alfred ‘The Hero’ Jooooooooooooones!”

Applause. Cheers.

“Ivan Bragiiiiiiinsky the Terrible!”

Applause. Cheers.

They met in the center. The referee didn’t bother telling them to have a good fight—he’d seen their last fight. And he knew better than to think that they would touch gloves. They just glared at each other, both hostile but both clear-headed.

“Я уничтожу тебя,” Braginsky hissed.

“Bring it the fuck on.”

They moved back to their corners. The referee lifted his hand.

Alfred glanced back at his corner. He saw Matthew, hands cupped

around his mouth as he shouted Alfred's name. He saw François and Antonio, pumping their fists in the air. He saw Kiku sitting, tense and quiet. He saw Arthur standing up from his seat, not saying anything, just leaning forward and watching with glistening eyes. Alfred smiled at him, mouthed, "I love you," and hoped that Arthur could see it.

The bell went off, and the fight began.

## Chapter Notes

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## 23

Braginsky didn't play games this time. Didn't circle defensively around the ring, didn't take the extra time to size Alfred up. It was clear from the cruelty in his eyes that he wanted to end it quickly and painfully. From the moment the first round began, Braginsky stomped forward and began to throw punches. But Alfred and Coach had predicted as much.

"He's not going to try to mess with your mind this time. He's going to go in for the kill straight away. So you have to be ready, champ."

Alfred stayed on his toes. He brought up his hands to cage his face and, with his flexed arms, took the first few punches straight to his arms. They had the force of tidal waves. When Braginsky threw a hook, Alfred ducked underneath it.

He was faster and stronger than he'd been before.

As he ducked, he stepped forward and threw a shovel into Braginsky's side, quick and hard and painfully accurate. Even if Braginsky didn't make a sound, he saw the slightest cringe in him. As soon as his punch hit, Alfred jumped out of Braginsky's punching range and brought his hands back up. A good, clean hit, one that had definitely made Braginsky angry. Like a bull.

Braginsky didn't let up. He stepped forward and threw a fake to the right, before coming in with a left hook. Alfred stepped into it, took it against his forearm again, and paused when he saw Braginsky's other hand come up to defend. That pause was exactly what he'd needed, exactly what he'd planned, to throw off Braginsky's rhythm. As he blocked, Alfred took a step back, and then threw a kick down against Braginsky's thigh. This time, his crumple was visible, though he did not fall even to his knee. Alfred's shin had made perfect contact.

*Good. I'm doing well.*

*But I can't get comfortable.*

*I have to stay focused.*

He jumped out of Braginsky's punching range.

Braginsky kept coming. This time, he went straight in, with a jab and a cross aiming at Alfred's nose. Alfred managed to just barely slip the jab, and his block was enough to keep the cross from being clean. But it dizzied him a bit. Enough that when Braginsky threw his left hook, it landed cleanly on Alfred's jaw.

The world spun for a moment.

But only for a moment.

Alfred pulled himself back to the fight, back to where Braginsky was about to throw an overhand. Instead of blocking it, instead of taking the extra step and the extra time, Alfred went for the offensive move that he'd been waiting for. As Braginsky punched, Alfred lifted his own hand. He was faster. His fist landed against Braginsky's thick, angled jaw before Braginsky's could even get close. Braginsky stumbled back, so Alfred threw a kick. Braginsky managed to bring up his arm to block, but Alfred pushed. Pushed. He heard Coach's voice in his head—you've got him right where you want him, keep going. He drove Braginsky back toward the wall of the ring, throwing quick punches. Low, high, low, high, putting Braginsky in the most defensive pose he'd ever been in. He saw blood on Braginsky's lips, and finally saw something in his eyes—fury. Rage. Hatred.

Just before the bell rang to announce the end of the first round, Braginsky threw an unexpected punch up into Alfred's stomach. It shocked him enough to lower his guard.

The bell rang.

Braginsky still punched again.

It sent Alfred tumbling to the ground, bracing himself in a daze with his hands. The referee jumped in between them, raised his hands. Everything was spinning, Alfred could taste blood.

But he wasn't done yet, not by a long shot.

Stumbling, still clumsy, he managed to get back to his feet. He followed Coach's voice over to where he was waiting, with water and a towel, before the second round. Thirty seconds.

"You're doing great, Al, you're doing great," he said as he squeezed water into his red mouth. "You're keeping him on his toes. Listen, I think if you can get in a few more clean punches, you can knock him out. But time isn't on your side. If it keeps going like this...if you go into a third round, he'll win. That last punch was illegal, but even if it doesn't count for his score, it hurt you. Stay alert."

Alfred nodded. His eyes flitted over to where his brother, his friends, his lover were watching. They looked stressed. He chuckled.

"What are you gonna do when you get back out there, champ?"

"Fuck him up."

"Atta boy. Go get 'em, champ."

The bell rang for the second round to begin. Alfred knew that he would have to end it within the next three minutes—otherwise, he would break his promise.

When Alfred fought, he saw Arthur's face. Smiling, scowling, crying, screaming, laughing. The face he made when he first woke up in the morning, the face he made when he was moaning Alfred's name in the sheets.

Braginsky did not hesitate. He threw punch after punch. Suddenly, Alfred found himself on the defensive. Blocking, catching, slipping, ducking. One punch after the other, leaving no openings. Alfred knew that Braginsky was powerful, but he'd never imagined that he could throw such powerful, accurate punches, in such quick succession. He was at least thankful that he'd managed to get over his dizziness in the short break between rounds.

*I have to win.*

*For Coach.*

*After Ludwig, I'm all he's got.*

*For Matthew.*

*My little brother, my best friend, my biggest fan.*

*For Arthur.*

*We're going to buy a corgi together and travel the world.*

Alfred was done messing around. He didn't like being on defense. He channeled all the strength that he'd managed to build, all the skills and speed and agility and stamina, over the past year. In the split second between Braginsky's punches, he threw his own punches. Up toward Braginsky's exposed jaws. None of them clean.

One of Braginsky's made it through Alfred's defenses. One was enough.

Alfred fell again. He was still conscious, struggling to stand up. But Braginsky was on top of him, and Alfred knew it was over. There was no way for him to get Braginsky off of him, no way to shield his blows.

*It's over.*

*He's going to kill me.*

Everything became strangely silent. Alfred saw a little corgi. It was trotting around the ring, wiggling its short tail, its tongue lolling out of its smiling mouth. It barked at him.

"Hey, Alfred Fuzzy Jones," he smiled.

He knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, that Braginsky was punching him. But he couldn't feel it. He couldn't really feel anything.

"Alfred!"

Someone was calling his name. It was a familiar voice, a beautiful voice that flowed like water.

"Alfred! Stand up!"

The corgi barked at him.

Arthur was yelling at him.

Why was Arthur yelling at him?

"Fight back, Alfred! Fight back!"

Fighting? Is that what I'm doing?

“Don’t you want to be the champion, Alfred?”

The champion. I do want to be the champion.

“Get up and take it! Please, Alfred!”

The corgi licked his cheek. It smiled at him. Alfred closed his eyes and he laughed and he listened to that voice crying his name.

When he opened his eyes, lying on the ground, he saw a fist flying toward him. He reached up and he grabbed it, stopped it before it hit his bloodied face. Then, with his other fist, he punched Braginsky as hard as he could.

Ivan the Terrible swayed, stumbled, lost enough strength that Alfred managed to move out from under him, fall backwards, get up to his knees and then to his feet. He threw another punch. It hit Ivan the Terrible again, but still he did not fall.

*“GO ALFRED!”*

Alfred reached his fist back.

*An overhand should do it.*

He turned his hips and he swung his arm around, over his shoulder, down.

He heard the crack of Ivan the Terrible’s jaw as he fell.

He was too tired, too bloody, in too much pain to feel much of anything else when the referee announced that Ivan the Terrible was knocked out and lifted Alfred’s arm in the air.

“Alfred ‘The Hero’ Jones is the new UFC champion!”

He smiled to himself.

As the sound of ambulance sirens grew closer, closer, closer, Alfred thought of the little corgi.

The next few minutes were blurry. Alfred did what he could, in his daze, to lift the golden belt that he’d been given. He smiled and he raised it and he thought to himself, I’m a champion. Then he managed

to drag his feet, step step step, to where Coach was waiting. When he nearly fell coming down from the ring, Coach caught him. He was crying, he was laughing, he hugged Alfred very tightly. Alfred loved the sound of Coach laughing.

“You did it, Al! You fucking did it!” he was saying.

*I did it.*

Alfred couldn't support himself for much longer, and Coach could tell. He pulled up a chair and began barking orders at people. He dabbed Alfred's face with a wet towel, he bandaged his cuts, he talked about the fight. Said how scared he'd been, how he'd thought that he was going to lose Alfred. How thankful he was that Alfred had come back, a truly miraculous win, another reason for everyone to call him 'The Hero.' He truly was a hero, Coach said. You're the strongest hero out there, champ.

He wanted to see Matthew. He wanted to see François and Antonio. He wanted to call his parents and ask if they'd watched his fight from home.

He wanted to see Arthur.

“Coach, where's Arthur? Tell him I want to see him.”

“Be patient, Al, you're probably still seeing stars.”

The ambulance sirens had stopped, and Alfred was imagining Braginsky on a stretcher. The thought made him smile.

“Ow, fuck, my contact lenses.”

His hands were shaking so badly that he couldn't get his contact lenses out, even though they were hurting him.

“Almost done patching you up. Then we'll take you to the hospital to make sure you're all right.”

“I don't wanna go in an ambulance, Coach.”

“You're not gonna go in the ambulance.”

“Where's Arthur, Coach?”

Alfred looked up at the seats, where everyone had been sitting. They were all gone. The rest of the people in the stadium were



starting to spill out, too. Into the streets of Las Vegas.

“Where’s everybody? They were sitting right there the whole time.”

Coach didn’t answer. He kept dabbing Alfred’s face, putting bandages on the cuts, still occasionally barking orders at people. Alfred was coming back to his senses, was able to better understand his situation. The first thing he noticed was the expression on Coach’s face. He should’ve been elated, should’ve been smiling, laughing, so excited he could hardly sit still. But his face was like stone. Cold. Maybe even anxious.

“Coach? What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

Coach didn’t answer. Alfred grabbed Coach’s wrist, kept it from dabbing any more, and looked him dead in the eyes.

“Tell me where they are.”

“Al...”

We don’t know what happened, he said.

He just collapsed, he said.

During the second round, he collapsed, we called 911, he said.

Mattie and François and Antonio and Kiku went with him, he said.

We don’t know what happened, he said.

*Hey, Arthur, come on.*

*That’s not fair.*

Alfred forced Coach to stop, told him that he would worry about himself later. That at that very moment, whether he had cuts or bruises or a fucking concussion, it didn’t matter. He needed to go to the hospital, he needed to find Arthur, he needed to be with him. He couldn’t care less about being a champion at that moment, couldn’t care less about anything at all.

“If you won’t drive me, then I’ll find a taxi,” he said, putting his jacket on.

“Slow down, Al. I’ll drive you.”

“Then let’s go.”

They found the others in the waiting room of the emergency room, their heads down and their faces pale. When they saw Alfred and Coach walk in they stood up. Matthew hugged him for a long time—a long, long time.

“I’m so proud of you, Al. I’m so proud.”

François and Antonio kissed his cheeks.

“You were amazing, Alfie.”

“Truly a hero.”

Kiku bowed to him.

“You fought very well, Alfred.”

But their faces betrayed their words. There were shadows in their cheeks, a dullness in their eyes. Alfred couldn’t feel happy when they congratulated him.

“Where’s Arthur? What happened?”

“It was during the second round,” Matthew began. “Right after Braginsky had knocked you to the ground. We were cheering—fuck, we were so scared. And then Arthur, he...he just...”

“He collapsed. We have no idea why. We called 911 as soon as we could,” François finished. “We’re waiting for the doctor to tell us what happened.”

“Come. Sit. It will do no good to be impatient,” Antonio said. They all sat down in the seats. The waiting room wasn’t terribly crowded on that Friday night. That was surprising to Alfred. As he sat, tapping his feet against the ground and trying to ignore the pain that suddenly erupted all over his body, as if finally catching up with him, Matthew rubbed his back. He wished that they would talk about something, anything, but they were all silent.

After about an hour—though it seemed more like years, years, years—a doctor came out. He was tall and dark and he looked serious, with the kind of doctor look that Alfred had always seen on television shows.

“My name is Dr. Adnan. Are you all here for Arthur Kirkland?” he

asked.

“Is he all right?” Alfred asked, instantly standing up. Dr. Adnan took a deep breath, and sat down in the chair across from them. Matthew tugged on Alfred’s sleeve. He sat back down.

“Mr. Kirkland went into cardiac arrest.”

Alfred couldn’t see anything. The world spun.

“Uh, sorry, what does that mean?” he heard Matthew say.

“It means he experienced an abnormality in his heart’s rhythm, called an arrhythmia. It has to do with the electric impulses that help the heart function. When the heart doesn’t function the way it’s meant to, it can keep oxygen from getting to the brain. Which, of course, can cause serious damage.”

“Why? He was healthy!”

“Well, sudden cardiac arrest is the most common cause of natural death in the United States. We can’t always explain it. Of course, there are usually risk factors. He’s young, so age isn’t one of them.”

There was silence for a few moments. Alfred felt like he couldn’t breathe. The walls of this unfamiliar hospital in Las Vegas were closing in on him.

“I was hoping you all could help me determine the cause of his cardiac arrest. Do you know about his medical history?”

“They do. Right, Al? Kiku?”

“Yes,” Kiku said.

Alfred nodded, though he wasn’t sure what he was nodding to.

“Okay, well, first the basics. Does he have a family history of heart disease?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“No,” Kiku said.

“Any heart issues in the past?”

“No,” Alfred replied.

“Is he a smoker?”

“Yeah.”

“That increases the risk there. Any other type of diseases or abnormalities that you can think of? Addictions, dietary habits, anything.”

Alfred paused. He didn’t want to say it because he didn’t want to believe it.

“Al...?” Matthew murmured.

“Bulimia,” Alfred said. He choked on his words. “He used to have bulimia. But he doesn’t anymore. He got better, I swear. Right, Kiku? He got better?”

Kiku nodded silently.

“That would be a logical explanation, actually,” Dr. Adnan sighed. “Eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia definitely increase the risk of sudden cardiac arrest. In fact, the most common cause of death in bulimic patients is cardiac arrest.”

“No, that can’t be right,” Alfred said, shaking his head. “He’s not bulimic anymore. He went to therapy. He’s on meds. He stopped, I swear, so...”

“The effects of bulimia can be long-lasting, especially if he suffered from it for a long time. It throws electrolytes in the body off balance and increases the risk for heart failure. Do you know how long he was bulimic?”

“About seven years,” Kiku said quietly.

“That’s not fair, that’s not *fair*,” Alfred cried. He couldn’t look up at the doctor’s face. “He was getting better. He was fixing himself—so that he could avoid this sort of thing. There’s probably another reason, there has to be.”

“Is he going to be okay, Dr. Adnan?” Matthew asked quietly.

The doctor paused for a moment.

“Unfortunately, we weren’t able to perform CPR before there was significant damage to his brain. He’s suffering from severe brain hypoxia--his brain has gone without oxygen for too long. It’s failing

him now.”

*No, you can't be serious.*

*This can't be real.*

“There’s a chance that he’ll recover with permanent brain damage, but...”

*Why am I always in hospitals? I feel like I'm always in hospitals.*

“...To be honest, the chance is slight. More likely than not, he’ll enter a permanent vegetative state.”

*He was better.*

*The doctor must have made a mistake.*

“What now? What can we do?” François asked. His voice was broken.

“He’s fading in and out of consciousness right now. He can--and will--enter a coma at any moment. I’m afraid we’ve done all we can. Would you like my honest advice?”

“Please.”

*No. Stop it.*

*Please.*

“We’re making him as comfortable as possible.”

*Someone wake me up from this nightmare.*

“Say your goodbyes. As soon as you can.”

“You’re lying to me, you have to be,” Alfred hissed. “That’s not possible. He was fine! I was talking to him just a few hours ago and he was fine! He can’t...he can’t be...”

“Does Arthur know?” François whispered.

“Yes. We told him what we’ve told you, and he’s made clear what he wants from us.”

“Which is...?”

“He doesn’t want us to prolong anything once he’s entered the coma. His room is over that way,” Dr. Adnan said with a bow of his head. He stood from his seat. “I’m very sorry. I wish there was more that we could do.”

Alfred shook. There must have been an earthquake beneath his feet, beneath only his feet. He covered his trembling lips with his trembling hands and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see through the mess of tears in his eyes. The hospital walls were crashing down on him, burying him in the rubble, while his brother rubbed his back and his coach stroked his hair and he couldn’t fucking breathe.

*I can’t fucking breathe.*

Antonio and François went in together. François cried, Antonio cried because François cried. They stayed with Alfred, then, when Coach and Matthew went in. Alfred was sobbing and nobody batted an eyelash because he was in the waiting room of a hospital so it was natural for him to be sobbing. When they came back, Kiku went in. He returned with red eyes and a slightly quivering lower lip.

It was Alfred’s turn.

“Do you want me to go in with you, Al?” Matthew asked, his voice soft.

Alfred shook his head.

Then he walked down to where the doctor said Arthur’s room was. He knocked lightly on the door, wiped his tears so that Arthur wouldn’t be able to see them, and he walked inside.

He wondered why it was always hospitals.

## Chapter Notes

Here it is! The last chapter.

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It's been an amazing ride--I loved writing every word of this story, and I hope that you all enjoyed it, too. I so appreciate you taking the time and energy to read the words that I've written. Every one comes straight from my soul. Overdramatic, perhaps, but I mean it. And you guys make this whole, sometimes frustrating, writing thing way worth it.

Shameless plug: if you liked this story, take a look at some of my others! I have a few others currently in the works so keep a lookout for those, too

(☹☹❀)

Love you all so much, enjoy the final installation of "Lovely As You Are."

Fight on loves

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Arthur had an IV in his arm. He was calm and quiet in his bed. His eyes were open, somehow glimmering, as he stared vacantly at the ceiling. His gaze shifted when Alfred walked inside and closed the door behind him. The corners of his lips twitched, he blinked slowly, his fingers lifted from the bed ever so slightly.

"Al," he breathed. His voice was hardly there. Alfred did his best to muster a smile. He sat down in the chair beside Arthur's bed and grabbed his hand in both of his.

"Hey, Arthur," he said.

"I must look terrible."

“You look beautiful. So beautiful.”

He looked like he could have done a photoshoot. Divine, haunting.

“You look rather banged up yourself. Did you win, love?”

“Yeah, I won.”

“Really? I’m so glad,” Arthur smiled. He closed his eyes, as if he didn’t have enough energy to smile and keep them open at the same time. “I was so worried about you.”

“Come on, I told you I’d be fine.”

*You? Worried about me?*

“I should’ve trusted you more.”

“Yeah. You should’ve.”

Alfred squeezed Arthur’s hand. Perhaps too hard. Perhaps not hard enough. He leaned forward against the bed and put his hand to Arthur’s cheek. Brushed the strands of sweaty, matted hair from his forehead.

“You’re a champion now. I’m so proud of you.”

“I don’t think it’s really sunk in yet,” Alfred said.

“Al, can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

He didn’t want to cry in front of Arthur, but the tears came anyway. He smiled to keep them at bay, but that only made them flow harder.

“If you could take me anywhere in the world, at this very moment, where would you take me?”

“Back to Lake Placid,” Alfred said without hesitation.

“Really? How funny. I was thinking the same thing. You could teach me how to really swim, and we could hike every trail there.”

“There are, like, hundreds...”



“We’d do all of them.”

“Sure we would.”

“And we’d bring Alfred Fuzzy Jones with us. I’m sure he’d like to hike.”

Alfred bit his lower lip, but it wasn’t enough to keep the sob from escaping his lips. Arthur blinked at him slowly.

“I’m sorry, Alfred.”

“You don’t have to apologize...”

“If I had been better, you wouldn’t be crying.”

“It’s not your fault,” Alfred said. He brought Arthur’s hand to his lips.

“I wish you didn’t have to see me like this,” Arthur sighed. He looked back up at the ceiling. Then Alfred noticed the tears on his cheeks, too. “I don’t want it to be how you remember me.”

“Hey, stop talking like that,” Alfred said. “We still have a lot to do. We still have to see the rest of New York. We still have to take that road trip in England. You still have a movie to finish filming! And somewhere out there, there’s a corgi waiting for you to adopt it. I won, and you promised, remember?”

“Let’s play truth or dare, Al,” Arthur said. His voice was so quiet. “You go first. Truth or dare?”

“I’m a bit scared of your dares.” Alfred kissed Arthur’s hand again. He was shaking terribly. “Truth.”

“Okay, truth.” Arthur closed his eyes once more. “What would you do if I died?”

Alfred couldn’t answer. There were no words for him to say.

“Would you wear black, and keep a picture of me in your wallet? Would you buy a dog, or a cat, or even a fish, and name it Arthur? Would you go to my funeral and meet my brothers, and become their friend?”

“I’d stop believing in god,” Alfred murmured. “There can’t be someone so sick and twisted that he’d bring you into my life and make

me fall in love with you and then take you out like that.”

“I don’t think it would be god’s fault. Just the way things worked out.”

“I’m sorry, Arthur.”

He could hardly say his name.

“Al, would you tell me how much you love me? Please? The way you did that night at the lake. Do you remember?”

“You’re like a painting,” Alfred whispered. He remembered so well every word.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Arthur opened his eyes slowly. He smiled. “Will you come into bed with me, please? Hold me?”

Alfred was gentle when he lifted the sheets that covered Arthur’s body and eased himself into the bed beside him. He was afraid that if he rocked the bed too hard, took up too much room, Arthur would disappear right before his eyes and that would have been so cruel, so unfair. Arthur turned to his side and reached weakly toward Alfred’s chest. Alfred wrapped his arms around that frail, barely breathing body, and pulled it in, until he could feel the raspy breaths on his neck and fit his lips against Arthur’s forehead.

“Tighter, please.”

He squeezed tighter.

Even now, he smelled like roses.

“Will you keep going for me, Al?”

Alfred kissed Arthur’s forehead and began whispering into his ear.

“You move like watercolor. You breathe out colors of the sunset, you blink in shades of grass and emerald green. You touch me the way an artist touches brush to canvas, you mark my skin and bleed your paint onto me. Sometimes you’re saturated and bright, sometimes you speak in gray and black hues. Everything about you is beautiful.”

“Even now? I’m still beautiful now?”

“The most beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my life. At this very moment,” Alfred said.

"I wish I could tell you how much I loved you, too. Like a poet," Arthur sighed. His body shaking like a baby bird, but also like a tsunami that drowned Alfred in its magnificence. "But I think I love you too much to describe. And I'm tired, anyway."

"Don't leave me, please."

"Keep holding me, just like this."

Arthur released any and all tension in his limbs and let himself fall completely against Alfred. Trusting him to carry him somewhere, anywhere, that wasn't this hospital bed. When Alfred glanced down at Arthur's pale, tear-stained face, he saw a smile. The most dazzling smile Arthur had ever given him.

"I don't want you to go," Alfred murmured. "Please, don't go. Not after what you did for me--what you gave me..."

"Shh. I didn't give you anything, my darling," Arthur said.

"Yes you did. You gave me a reason to love, a reason to be strong. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Arthur. You can't go."

"Would you smile, please? I want to see your smile, Al. My beautiful, my crazy Alfred. Your smile is so perfect."

Alfred smiled.

"There it is. Lovely as always."

Arthur's eyes lost their light. He closed them, and his breathing slowed, just like when he would fall asleep. That's what it felt like, then. Like those nights when Alfred had held Arthur so close and paid attention to every single breath until the sighs of wakefulness turned to sighs of sleep. And he could feel Arthur drifting off because he tended to trust Alfred more in his sleep--trusted him to keep him warm, secure, have a chest to use as his pillow and a pair of arms his blanket. Arthur was falling asleep now in Alfred's arms, trusting him, saying without saying it, Carry me.

"Soon our paths will converge again," he said. Just like he'd said in his letter one year ago. "I know it."

"Please, please, please..." Alfred wasn't sure who he was begging, or for what.

“Thank you for the love that you gave me. I will cherish it always. You know that, don’t you? That you gave me a forever? You gave me a forever.”

Alfred’s tears flowed down into Arthur’s hair.

“Al?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m so tired.”

“You can go to sleep. It’s okay. I’ll hold you.”

“You won’t leave?”

“No. Never.”

“All right...I’ll see you in the morning, Al. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

Alfred held Arthur until he fell asleep. Then he walked out of the room, made his way to where the others were waiting, and told them that he wanted to go home.

Kiku secured tickets for Alfred, Matthew, and François to London for the funeral. Arthur, he knew, wouldn’t have wanted it to be in America. His heart was in London, after all. Matthew helped Alfred find a nice suit, and in the moments that Alfred lost his composure Matthew and François told him to take his glasses off and handed him tissues. He couldn’t turn on the television because Arthur was all over the news—either Arthur, or Alfred. The resurrected hero who took down the villainous Ivan the Terrible, ripped the championship from his hands and was slated to stay champion for a while.

Alfred couldn’t handle it so he kept the television off. He avoided any press at all. Matthew, while he was soft-spoken and quiet most of the time, kept the paparazzi leeches away from Alfred like a bouncer.

Of course Alfred couldn’t be happy that he’d won. Couldn’t feel like the champion that he now was. He didn’t feel any satisfaction. He couldn’t remember what had happened in the fight, even when he watched and watched and rewatched the YouTube videos in the middle of the night when he couldn’t sleep. Every time the good

memories were washed away by the bad ones. The awful ones. The refreshing, blood-pumping smell of the ring was replaced by the clinical smell of that Las Vegas hospital. The rush of winning replaced by the terror he'd felt in the waiting room. The vision of Ivan the Terrible at his feet replaced by the vision of Arthur, tears on his cheeks, smiling in the hospital bed.

"Okay, Al. Are you ready?"

He was fixing his suit in the mirror on the morning of the funeral. Matthew and François were standing behind him. François was trying to help him get his defiant cowlick down. It had always been pretty rebellious. But François was good with it.

"No."

"It's okay. We'll be right next to you, *chéri*," François murmured. "If it becomes too much, tell us."

"I'll be fine, guys." Alfred smiled at them, straightened his glasses. "Man, what should I tell his family? How do I introduce myself? Do you think he told them about me? No, definitely not."

"Just tell them you were a very close friend. I'm sure Kiku has spoken to them."

"I hope his brothers are nice. And his parents. I mean, Arthur wasn't close with them, but I still want to get to know them."

"I bet they're glad that you're here."

"I hope you're right."

Arthur's family was there. The service was shorter than Alfred had been expecting. Before it started he introduced himself to Arthur's parents and his three younger brothers.

"My name is Alfred. I was a very good friend of Arthur's."

They didn't seem to be listening to him. They generically thanked him for coming. Only his mother and youngest brother were crying. Alfred was somehow dry-eyed. They weren't interested in talking to him, he could tell. They were nothing like Arthur, nothing at all, and Alfred apologized to Arthur.

"I don't think I'll be able to get close to your family. Sorry."

He sat and he listened to the service with Matthew on one side and François on the other. He couldn't remember what anybody had said about Arthur. His parents didn't speak for very long. Only one of his brothers—the youngest, the same one who'd been crying—spoke.

When the time came to put the casket in the ground Alfred couldn't do it. Suffocating, gripping his heart, eyes stinging, he ran back to the car Kiku had sent for him and he sat in the backseat and he sobbed. He sobbed until Matthew and François returned. Matthew held onto him like he was an infant, crying but unable to ask for what he wanted. There was no way to get it, after all.

*I finally got to see London, Arthur.*

*Sorry I couldn't see it with you.*

It was dark. One week after the funeral, back in New York City. Alfred had spent another night alone in his room, but he couldn't sleep. It must have been two, or three in the morning. Coach had called him, but he hadn't answered. He was to go back to the gym tomorrow, keep training. Someone was set to challenge him in a few months and he needed to be ready to defend his championship.

Alfred stepped into his ripped jeans, put on a leather jacket, fixed his glasses, grabbed a protein bar and went down to his Thunderbird. He could almost hear Arthur's voice in his head.

*And just where are you going, James Dean?*

He smiled to himself and he drove wishing that he had a pack of gummy bears. Drove, drove, until he was in front of the hospital. He hadn't really planned on coming this way, but now that he was here, he needed to go inside. There was something very important he needed to do, something that he'd needed to do for a while. He went inside, took the elevator, passed by the nurse's station. He was worried for a second that he had the wrong room. He hadn't been here in a few weeks.

Ludwig looked just as he had back when Coach had brought Alfred here the first time. He hadn't changed at all. Even on the bed like that, he looked like a fighter. Alfred knew that he would never open his eyes again. He wasn't sure if he could even hear him, but he sat down beside the bed and he spoke to him anyway.

“Hey, Blitzkrieg,” he said. “How are you doing? Hope you don’t think it’s weird, me coming to visit you. We never met when you were...when you were a fighter. I didn’t even know Coach then. But you were really inspiring anyway.”

He smiled and crossed his legs.

“Sorry, maybe you’d rather I call you Ludwig. Anyway, I watched your fight with Ivan the Terrible. Coach gave me the video. You fought so well. You didn’t deserve what was done to you. But I have really good news. That’s why I’m here, actually.”

Alfred had cried a lot in the past few weeks. So he hardly noticed when the tears fell.

“I won. I beat Ivan the Terrible. I’m the champion. Coach and I beat him. Isn’t that awesome? I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you. I think Coach did all of it, trained me and stuff, thinking about you.”

*You move like watercolor. You breathe out colors of the sunset, you blink in shades of grass and emerald green. You touch me the way an artist touches brush to canvas, you mark my skin and bleed your paint onto me. Sometimes you’re saturated and bright, sometimes you speak in gray and black hues. Everything about you is beautiful.*

Alfred lifted his glasses and used the back of his sleeve to wipe his eyes.

It was always hospitals.

“We got him for you. So you have to wake up and challenge *me* next. To take back your title...”

Alfred leaned his head down on Ludwig’s bed.

“Don’t you just hate this hospital?” he breathed. “I fucking hate this hospital.”

Maybe that wasn’t fair. The hospital had given him something wonderful, after all.

“Well, guess I’ll come visit you again soon, Blitzkrieg.”

He stood up, mustered his smile, put his hands in his pockets. For the first time in his life, he was craving a cigarette.

*Look at your lips—they dance and they speak acrylics. Your eyes are each a different universe that I’m floating between. I’m trapped in that little gap between your teeth. I put my palms against your chest, like this, and the touch overwhelms me so much that I worry for a moment that I’ve lost my heartbeat. That mine is yours, yours is mine, I don’t know. When you yell at me I hear music. When I carry you on my back I feel like a missing piece has been fitted to me.*

When he got home, he put in his headphones and got on his computer.

*Lovely as you are.*

He went to the humane society’s website and looked at the dogs that were up for adoption. There weren’t any corgis, but there was a golden retriever puppy.

*Lovely as you are.*

“Can’t wait to meet you, Arthur.”



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